

THE GREAT AMULET

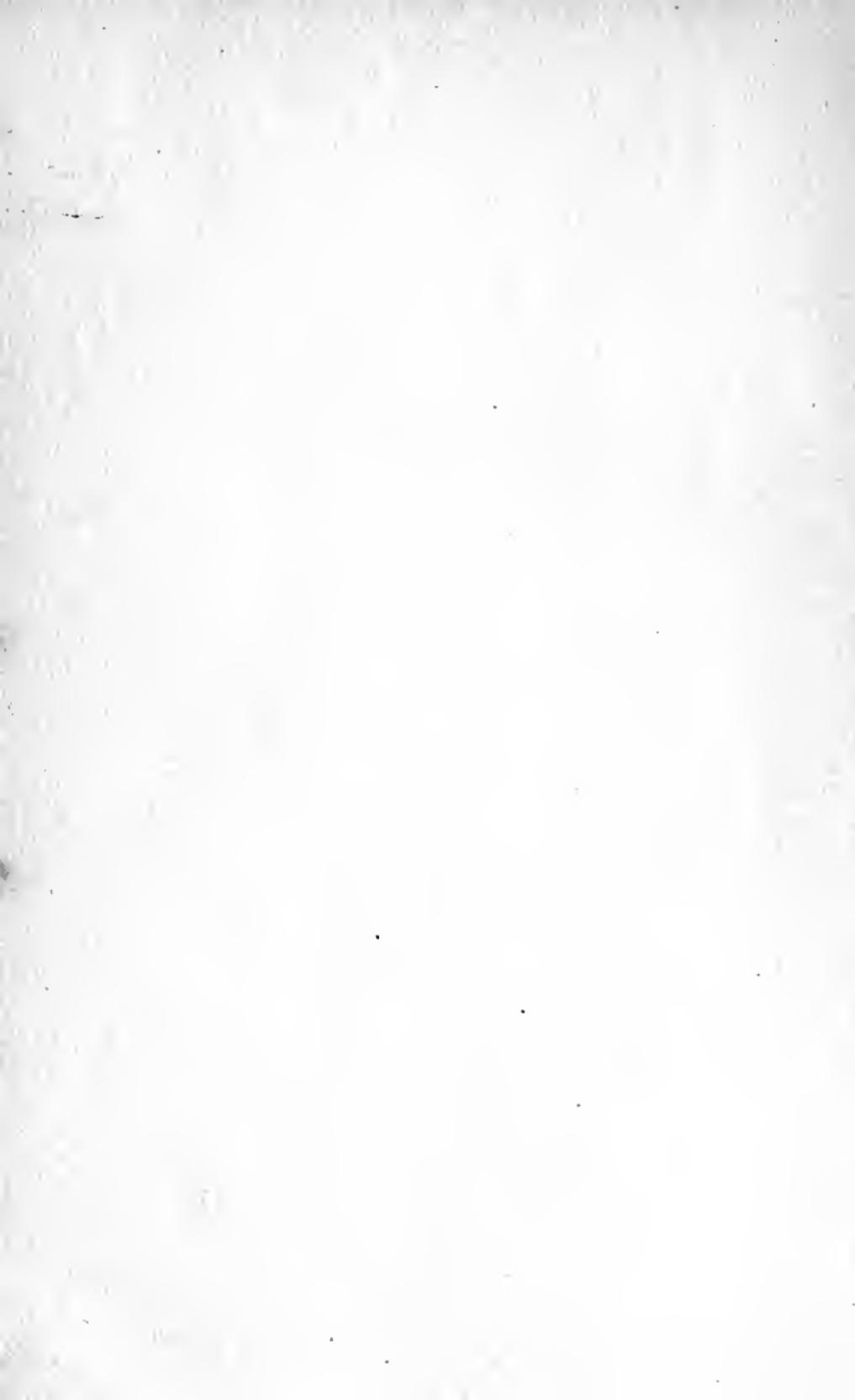
MAUD DIVER

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SEVENTEEN FORTY
ACRES OF PACIFIC
SAND PACIFIC AVENUE
LONG BEACH, CALIF.

M. H. P.

1910



THE GREAT AMULET

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THE GREAT AMULET

BY

MAUD DIVER

AUTHOR OF 'CAPTAIN DESMOND, V.C.'

"Love is the great Amulet that makes this world a garden ;
and 'Hope that comes to all' outwears the accidents of life ;
and reaches with tremulous hands beyond the grave and Death."

—R. L. S.

"Four things come not back to man or woman : the sped arrow ; the spoken word ; the past life ; and the neglected opportunity."—OMAR EL KHUTTUB.

NEW YORK
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MCMVIII



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1908

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO

TRIX FLEMING

IN MEMORY OF DALHOUSIE DAYS.

*Let thy heart see that still the same
Burns early friendship's sacred flame.
The affinities have strongest part
In youth, to draw men heart to heart :
As life draws on, and finds no rest,
The individual in each breast
Is tyrannous to sunder them.*

—ROSSETTI.

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THE GREAT AMULET.

PROLOGUE.

I.

“ The little more, and how much it is !
The little less, and what worlds away.”

—BROWNING.

No one in Zermatt dreamed that a wedding had been solemnised in the English church on that September afternoon of the early eighties. Tourists and townsfolk alike had been cheated of a legitimate thrill of interest and speculation. Nor would even the most percipient have recognised as bride and bridegroom the tall dark Englishman, in a rough shooting suit, and the girl, in simple white travelling gear, who stood together, an hour later, on the outskirts of the little town, and took leave of their solitary wedding guest:—an artist *cap-à-pie*; velveteen coat, loosely knotted tie, and soft felt hat complete.

In this Bohemian garb Michael Maurice,—as the bride's brother,—had led his sister up the aisle, and duly surrendered her to Captain Lenox, R.A., serenely unaware, the while, of censorious side-glances bestowed upon him by the ascetic-featured chaplain, who had an air of officiating under protest, of silently asserting his own aloofness from this hole-and-corner method of procedure. But his attitude was powerless to affect the exalted emotion of

that strange half-hour, wherein, by the repetition of a few simple, forcible words, a man and woman take upon themselves the hardest task on earth with a valiant assurance which is at once pathetic and sublime.

To Quita Maurice, impressionable at all times, the absence of ceremony, of those trivialities which obscure and belittle the one supreme fact, gave an added solemnity to the unadorned service: forced upon her a half-disturbing realisation that she was passing from an independence, dearer to her than life, into the keeping of a man:—a man of whom she knew little beyond the fact that he loved her with a strength and singleness of heart which is the heritage of those who reach life's summit without indulging in emotional excursions by the way.

And now all needful preliminaries were over; even to the wedding breakfast, a cheerful, casual meal of cold chicken, iced cake, and a bottle of champagne, served in Maurice's unpretentious rooms, on the pastry-cook's second floor.

The scene of their brief courtship lay behind them, dozing in the golden stillness of late September: before them a footpath climbed through a forest of pine and fir to the Riffel Alp Hotel; and on all sides multitudinous mountains flung heroic contours outward and upward, to a galaxy of peaks, that glittered diamond-bright upon a turquoise sky. A mule, ready-saddled, champed his bit at a respectful distance from the trio: for Lenox, an indefatigable mountaineer, had insisted on taking the footpath up to the Riffel; where they would spend ten days, before crossing into Italy, and so on to Brindisi, *en route* for his station in India.

The expiration of his leave, and his determination to take Quita Maurice back with him, were responsible for the brevity of their engagement, and for the absence, in both, of that brand-new aspect which proclaims a bride and bridegroom to an eternally interested world.

For this last Eldred Lenox was abundantly grateful. All the Scot in him asserted itself in a fierce reticence, an inbred sense of privacy where a man's deepest feelings were concerned: and now, as he stood battling with his

impatience to be gone, he was suffering acute discomfiture from the demonstrative leave-taking in progress between Maurice and his sister. For their sakes, at least, he would fain have effaced himself: while they, as a matter of fact, were momentarily oblivious of his existence.

Artists both, of no mean quality, they had lived and worked together for five years, since the day when Michael had rented his first modest studio in the King's Road, Chelsea: and, setting aside Art, his feeling for Quita was the one serious element in a nature light and variable as a summer cloud. From his French mother he derived an elastic spirit that yielded itself to the emotion of the passing moment; and Lenox, watching him, marvelled at the sharp dividing-lines drawn between the different races of earth.

He half resented such facility of self-expression. Possibly he envied it: though no doubt he would have denied the impeachment with an oath.

Eventually it occurred to Maurice that he could not well stand in the roadway till sunset, taking leave of the sister he was so loth to lose, and, with a sigh of exasperation, he pushed her gently towards her husband.

“*Voilà, cherie, . . .* enough of my endless adieux, or *ce bon* Lenox may be tempted to break the sixth commandment on my account, in addition to the eighth.”

Lenox smiled tolerantly down from six feet of height upon his slim, fair brother-in-law.

“That temptation should be your own prerogative, my dear fellow, since I am taking her from you for good.”

Maurice laughed.

“*Mon Dieu*, yes. You have certainly given me a fair excuse to hate you. And I have wondered more than once, in the last three months, why one could not manage it.”

“Too fatiguing for a man of your calibre!” the other answered with good-humoured bluntness. “You could never be bothered to keep it up.”

“Ah, *mon ami*, you men who speak little speak to the point! You are altogether too discerning. But for Quita's sake, at least, we could never be otherwise than firm

friends. With all my heart I wish good fortune to you both, and count the days to your return."

The two men shook hands cordially: and Lenox, beckoning the muleteer, lifted his wife into the saddle; thus averting a final demonstration. She waved her hand to a blurred vision of her brother, smiling resolutely, till his back was turned: and he departed townward;—a lonely brown figure, to which a slight stoop of the shoulders lent an added air of pathos.

Quita sat looking after him, her stillness belying the clash of emotions at her heart.

That vanishing figure on the sunlit road stood for all that she knew and loved best in the world: for Art, independence, good comradeship: for the happy, irresponsible, hand-to-mouth life of Bohemia: for the Past, dear and familiar, as a well-loved voice: while the quiet man at her side,—whose mere presence suggested latent force, and gave her a sense of protection wholly new to her,—stood for the Future; the undiscovered country, peopled with possibilities, dark and bright. And Quita Lenox, being blest, or curst, with the insight and detached spirit of the artist, saw clearly that the Great Experiment held, for her, a large element of hazard; that she had staked her all upon a turn of the wheel, with what resulting Time alone could show.

Her husband's hand on her arm brought reflection abruptly to an end.

"He is almost out of sight now," Lenox said quietly. "And I think it's time we made a start. Will you come?"

She turned to him at once, with a smile whose April quality heightened its charm.

"Of course I will; and gladly. Don't think me horrid, Eldred. I have always been frank with you, haven't I? And . . . it is a wrench leaving Michael to live and work alone."

"I quite understand that: and I value your devotion to him for selfish reasons. It proves what you may be capable of feeling . . . for me, one of these days."

The mingled dignity and humility of his tone so moved her that her only answer was an impulsive pressure of

the hand resting on her arm: and they went forward for a long while without further speech, the muleteer having set off for the summit by a series of short cuts known to his kind.

Before long massed pines were above and below them; their jagged stems and branches sharply imprinted on stretches of sunlit glacier, and on the pathway in mottled patches of shadow.

Eldred Lenox walked close to his wife, one hand resting on the crupper behind her. The man's intensity of feeling did not rise readily to the surface; and a certain proud sensitiveness, the cardinal weakness of big natures, withheld him from the full expression of an emotion to which she could not adequately respond. He was content to wait, and hope; and in the meanwhile, he walked at her side wrapt in the mere joy of possession; one of the strongest, yet least recognised passions of a man's heart. From time to time he glanced at her attentively; and each glance strengthened his faith in that which had come upon him, sudden as an earthquake, and no less subversive of ancient landmarks, of confirmed prejudices and convictions in regard to the woman element in man's life.

For Quita Lenox, though far from beautiful, in the accepted sense, was undeniably good to look at. Coils of soft hair, golden in the sun, brown in the shade; eyes neither grey nor green, intensified by unusually large pupils, and by brows and lashes almost black; a straight nose, low at the root; a mouth too long, too mobile for beauty, its emotional quality safeguarded by an uncompromising chin, completed a face whose charm lay in no particular excellence of details; but in the vivid spirit,—quick to see, to feel, to understand,—that informed and harmonised a somewhat contradictory whole. An abiding sense of humour, hovering about her lips and in her eyes, kept the world sane and sweet for her, and leavened her whole outlook on life. A minor quality completed her charm. By virtue of the French blood in her veins, she imparted, even to the simplest garments, an air of distinction, of exquisite finish, to which an Englishwoman rarely attains.

At three-and-twenty Quita Lenox was very artist, though not, as yet, very woman. The complex Ego, which is the keystone of Art, had not been tested and dominated by the great simple forces, which are the keystone of life.

But her husband was in no mood to analyse her appearance, or her charm. He wanted beyond all things to know what was passing in her mind; and because his own thoughts were too passionate for utterance, he waited for her to speak. But for the first time in his knowledge of her, he waited in vain. Protracted silence on her part was a phenomenon so unusual, that at length he turned to her definitely, a shadow of misgiving in his clear Northern eyes.

"Are you thinking over it all very seriously . . . now that it is done past undoing?"

He smiled in speaking, and she met his look with her accustomed frankness.

"And if I am . . .? Surely that service gives one food for reflection. I had not so much as looked at it since early days when curiosity impelled me to read it through; and weddings have never been in my line. As a matter of fact, I was thinking just then what unaccountable creatures we men and women are! How we ponder, and debate, and fuss over trifles, and then plunge headlong past the big turning-points of life, without a thought of the consequences lurking round the corner. Which doesn't mean that you and I need spell our consequences with a capital C, or label them tragic in advance," she added with a laugh. "For honestly, it seems to me that a rising artist, and a rising explorer, both devout worshippers of the eternal hills, may reasonably expect to possess many ideas and interests in common: and those are the bricks out of which two people build their House of Happiness, *n'est-ce pas, mon ami?*"

"Yes; if you choose to leave mutual trust, and mutual devotion, out on the doorstep."

"I don't choose: only, they are not the bricks, Eldred. One is the foundation-stone; and the other,—the other is a great mysterious Something, that transforms the House

into an enchanted palace. But we must be content to begin with the House,—do you see?"

"Yes—I see. I am abundantly content to begin on any terms."

Something in the man's tone impelled her to lean outward a little, so that her shoulder rested lightly against the arm passed behind her.

"You are much too good to me, dear," she said softly. "I don't think one could possibly live with you and fail to love you. That is why I have dared to take the risk."

He did not answer in words, nor did he give her the kiss she half expected; but his hand deserted the crupper, and the mule pricked a velvet ear at the check in his progress. Then Quita straightened herself, as if reasserting her cherished independence.

"After all, it is more interesting, in some ways, not to have everything cut and dried from the start," she went on, striking off at a tangent, with an innate perversity incomprehensible to a mere man. "It prevents a headlong fall into the commonplace: and there is a certain excitement in looking on, so to speak, at one's own personal drama, without feeling quite sure of its developments."

Lenox knitted his brows. He could not always keep pace with her more fantastic moods.

"Quita, are you talking nonsense?" he asked with a touch of irritation.

"No."

"Well, I wish you were. I don't like that sort of attitude towards serious things; and I don't understand what you mean about looking on at one's own life. It sounds brutally detached, not to say egotistical."

"That is because you only climb mountains and handle men, *mon cher*, instead of trying to paint them, or translate them into verse. You are spared the artist's complication of a dual personality; of two souls imprisoned in one body; the one who enjoys, and loves, and suffers; and the one who looks on, and picks every emotion to pieces. I am afraid the one you disapprove of has had the upper hand in me so far. Perhaps it is your mission to develop the other into a healthier state of activity."

"I hope to Heaven it may be," her husband answered fervently. "The present state of things strikes me as a trifle inhuman."

"But indeed I am not inhuman! Only . . . we have still a good deal to learn about one another, Eldred, although we are man and wife. You confess to an amazing ignorance of women; while my own varied experience of men has lain chiefly among 'the sayers of words'; and one can hardly class you under that heading!"

"Good Lord, no! I should hope not."

Quita threw up her head and laughed outright.

"Really, Eldred, you are delightful!"

"Glad to hear it," Lenox replied, a shade of sarcasm in his tone. "It's the first time I have been accused of such a thing."

He quickened his pace; and she, divining a slight jar in the atmosphere, said no more. The supreme art in human intercourse is the art of punctuation, and in the long pause that ensued, silence accomplished her perfect work.

Higher up they emerged on an open space of roadway, where the pines came abruptly to an end; and the path shelved sheer from its broken railing to the Visp Valley below. Instinctively Quita drew rein and drank in every detail of the vision before her with the wordless satisfaction that is the hall-mark of the true Nature-worshipper. Lenox stood quietly at her side, his gaze riveted on her face. He had seen many mountains, giants among their kind; but never till now had he beheld the glory of them reflected in a woman's eyes. At that moment they seemed the only sentient things in a world of rock, and snow, and sunshine. It was as if the round earth, and the pillars thereof, had been made for them, and them alone.

Above the road a weather-beaten hut struck an isolated note of life, and across the valley Matterhorn towered,—solitary, superb,—his rugged head and shoulders thrust heavenward through a diaphanous scarf of cloud.

Suddenly Quita Lenox fronted her husband, and his face softened to a smile that hovered in the eyes an appreciable time before it reached his lips.

"*À la bonheur!*" she said, smiling back at him. "We

will break our journey here. You can tether 'Modestina' to that stump. I must do a rough sketch of this, and put in notes for colouring, while you sit beside me and smoke, and talk. When it's complete, I'll present it to you as a memento of to-day. Will that suit you?"

"Rather!"

He lifted her from the saddle, in defiance of her laughing protest, and, holding her at arm's length, looked long and steadily into her eyes, as though he would reach and capture, by force of will, the elusive spirit that lived in their depths.

It was in these rare moments of revelation that Quita was troubled by a disconcerting sense of exchanging false coin for gold. She tried to free herself from his grasp; and the colour deepened in her cheeks.

"Eldred,—let me go!" she said, with something less than her wonted assurance. "It frightens me when you look right into me like that."

"Frightens you? Dearest, . . . what nonsense!" But for once he disregarded her behest.

"It's not nonsense. It makes me see too clearly the chained-up forces hidden under that surface quietness of yours. I think you might be rather terrible if they ever broke loose."

He laughed abruptly, and let her go.

"I keep them chained up, I promise you: and they are never likely to do *you* any harm. Now, begin upon your picture, and don't alarm yourself about nothing."

She watched him thoughtfully as he led "Modestina" away, and tethered her to a pine stump. It needed small discernment to perceive that the equitable poise of his character rested upon the noiseless conviction that he was a man, and a gentleman: and it seemed to her that she did well to feel proud of her husband.

With which satisfying conviction she settled herself upon a slab of a rock, whipped out the sketch-book, that hung permanently in a flat leather bag at her waist, and plunged headlong into her picture. For in her case, impression and expression were almost simultaneous: the most distinctive quality of her work being the rapidity and certainty with which she produced her effects.

Lenox, returning, extended his firmly-knit length of figure on the sloping ground near by, and flung aside his cap; thus revealing more clearly the rugged contour of his head, and the black hair whose obstinate ripple no amount of brushing could subdue. With leisurely deliberation he filled his pipe, and surrendered himself to the enchantment of the hour, before it slipped from him into the region of accomplished things. And it is this very evanescence, this rainbow quality of our hill-top moments, that adds such poignant intensity to their charm.

Much of their brief courtship had been spent in such wordless companionship: the man smoking beside her, with, or without, a book, while she worked; and he never wearied of watching that abiding miracle, a picture springing to life under an artist's fingers.

"You're not likely to give up this sort of thing, I suppose?" he asked suddenly; and she turned upon him with blank astonishment in her eyes.

"Give it up? . . . You might as well ask if I shall ever give up seeing, or hearing, or feeling. It is a part of me. You don't want me to give it up, do you?"

"Far from it. I was merely thinking that it seems suicidal for an artist of your quality to bury herself alive in a little Frontier station, on the edge of a desert, more than a hundred miles from anywhere."

"Rubbish! It simply means a new range of subjects for my brush. Tell me a little about it, please. I like to try and picture things in advance; and I am lamentably ignorant about this remarkable Frontier Force, to which I now have the honour to belong. Are we all on the wrong side of the Indus, always?"

"Yes, for ever and ever; except when we get away on leave."

"And then we go camping and climbing in the far hills beyond Kashmir, don't we?"

"Yes, invariably! For the rest of the time we keep 'cave' along six hundred miles of heart-breaking Border country."

"In other words, you are watch-dogs guarding the gates of an Empire?"

"That sounds far more imposing ; and it's no less true. We are also actively engaged in helping the Indian Government to cultivate friendly relations with the tribes at the point of the bayonet !"

"And don't the tribes respond ?"

"Yes, vigorously, to the tune of bullets and cold steel ; so that we manage to keep things pretty lively between us ! Since we annexed the Frontier, nearly forty years ago, the Piffers have taken part in more than thirty Border expeditions, all told, to say nothing of the Afghan War."

Quita's attention had been diverted from her picture to her husband's face.

"You get your fill of fighting at that rate," she said. "And I think you must be rather magnificent when you are fighting, Eldred."

Lenox shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"I'm a keen soldier, if that's what you're driving at : and I believe the world holds no finer school for character than constant active service."

"I confess I never thought of looking at war in that light ! But I can well believe it, if its horrors and hardships turn out many men . . . like you."

Words and tone set the man's pulses in commotion. But he clenched his teeth upon his pipe-stem, and ignored the personal allusion.

"Well, you can see for yourself, when you get there. Taking 'em all round, I think you'll find the Piffers as fine a set of fellows as you could wish to meet anywhere ; and it's hard work, and hard conditions of life, that thrash them into shape."

"And the stations, where I am to be 'buried alive' in such good company ?"

"I'm afraid the stations are the least satisfactory part of the programme. There are five of them along our north-west strip of desert ; all more or less hopeless to get at. We play general post among them every two or three years, to avoid stagnation and keep the men fit. Just now my battery's quartered at Dera Ghazee Khan, a God-forsaken place, right down by Scindh. I don't know how I have the cheek to think of taking you there."

"But if I refuse to be left behind . . . ?"

"Well, of course . . . in that case . . ." His eyes, looking up into hers, completed the sentence.

"I'm not a 'society woman,' remember; and setting aside your companionship, I should prefer a 'God-forsaken place' on the Indian Frontier to St John's Wood or Upper Tooting, any day! I am prepared to find it all very interesting."

"So you may, at the start. But the interest is likely to wear thin after the first few years of it."

"Well, perhaps by that time we shall have arrived at the enchanted palace, and then nothing else will matter at all!—There now; I've done all I can to my sketch for the present. Shall we go on?"

Lenox roused himself, not without reluctance; and they went on accordingly.

Towards the summit, trees grew rare: and they found the solitary hotel perched aloft, upon an open space; a hive of restless shifting human life, set in the midst of the changeless hills.

After a short interview with the manager's wife, they found themselves alone again, in the private sitting-room engaged by Lenox. A wood fire burned merrily in the open hearth, for September evenings are chilly at that altitude; and the windows, looking westward, gave generous admittance to a flood of afternoon sunlight.

Eldred, standing on the hearth-rug, surveyed all things in an access of silent satisfaction; while Quita moved lightly to and fro, frankly interested in details.

"Oh, how I love the cleanliness and emptiness of these Swiss rooms!" she exclaimed at last. "They make one feel so unspeakably wholesome and good. And we are actually going to have dinner here, you and I? Just our two selves! How strange!"

On a sudden impulse she came close to him, and standing before him, took the lapels of his coat, one in each hand.

"Eldred, . . . I don't seem able to take it in at all! Other brides have so much of external paraphernalia to emphasise the fact they have closed one chapter of life, and begun another. But except for that dreamlike half-hour in church, you and I seem merely to have come away

together for an everyday outing; and there is nothing anywhere, . . . except this,"—she lifted the third finger of her left hand,—“to make me realise that we are actually . . . married.”

She spoke the last word under her breath; and almost before it was out, he had caught her to himself, and kissed her fervently, again and again.

“Does that help you to realise it a little better, . . . my wife?” he whispered; and for answer she drew in a long breath that was almost a sob. He released her at once; and as she faced him, flushed and breathless, he saw that tears stood in her eyes.

“Why, . . . why did you never . . . kiss me . . . like that before?” she asked very low.

“God knows I have wanted to, a hundred times,” he answered. “But I think I was afraid you might . . . hate it. Why do you ask, though? Would it have made any difference between us if I had?”

“I can’t tell; . . . oh, I can’t tell! Only . . . you have been so restrained, so unlike an . . . ordinary lover, that I never dreamed it could mean as much to you . . . as all that . . .” She pulled herself together with an effort. “Now I am going to take off my things,” she said. “Don’t come, please. I want to get away by myself.”

A moment later he stood alone, between the sunlight and the firelight, gazing blankly at the door that hid her from view; and wondering whether he had advanced or retarded matters by his unpremeditated flash of self-revelation.

II.

“A turn, and we stand in the heart of things.”

—BROWNING.

When Eldred Lenox sailed from India six months earlier, he would have scouted as impossible the suggestion that he might bring a wife back with him on his return: and his uncompromising avoidance of women, from boyhood upward, had seemed to justify him in his assurance. But Nature is inexorable. She has her own

methods of accomplishing those things that are necessary to a man's salvation: and behold in three months the impossible had come to pass. The giant Mirabeau was right:—"ce bête de mot" ought by now to be struck out of our dictionaries.

Lenox knew little of half measures: and, having succumbed,—in spite of himself, in spite of inherent prejudices and convictions,—he succumbed heart and soul. That which he had unduly scorned, he now unduly exalted. Only Time and the woman could lead him into the Middle Way, which is the way of truth. For beneath the surface hardness of the Scot lurked the fire, the imaginative force, the proud sensitiveness of the Celt: a heritage from his Cornish mother, whose untimely death had left her two younger sons in the hands of a bachelor uncle, of red-hot Calvinistic views. Their father—a man of an altogether different stamp—had met his boys on rare occasions, and ardently desired to know more of them: but an Afghan knife had ended his career before he could find leisure to complete their acquaintance. The history of Anglo-India is one long chronicle of such minor tragedies.

Thus fire-eating Jock Lenox had exercised iron rule over his charges, unhampered by parental interference: had reared them in an unquestioning fear of God, and an unquestioning distrust of more than half His creatures: had impressed upon them, in season and out of season, that woman was the one fatal element in a man's life, the author of nine-tenths of its tragedy, complexity, and crime.

Yet "one touch of Nature" had annulled, in three months, the work of twenty years. So much for education!

For a while Lenox stood motionless where his wife had left him, as though life itself were suspended until her return: for despite the glory of autumn sunshine, of leaping flames upon the hearth, the room, robbed of her presence, seemed colourless, dead.

Then, as the minutes passed and she did not reappear, restlessness took possession of him; sure sign that he was very deeply moved. He crossed to the open window, but even the colossal calm of the mountains failed to quell the tumult of passion in his veins. Her last words left him

anxious. There could be no peace till he had interpreted them to his full satisfaction ; and the power of interpreting a woman's words could not be reckoned among his attributes.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he had pocketed two unopened envelopes before starting for church. He drew them out ; rather because he needed some definite occupation, than because he felt curious as to their contents. Men of his type are rarely overburdened with correspondents.

The first was a business letter. He read it with scant attention, and returned it to his breast-pocket. The second envelope bore the handwriting of his senior subaltern, now in England on short leave. The two men were close friends ; but Eldred's last letter had been written four months ago ; and the envelope in his hand contained Richardson's tardy response. He broke the seal with a smile at thought of his subaltern's astonishment when he should learn the truth. The letter was longer than usual ; and in glancing through it hurriedly, the name Miss Maurice caught his eye. "Great Scott !" he muttered aloud ; then, with quickened interest, began upon the second page, ignoring the opening.

"Wonder if you have run across the Maurices in Zermatt," wrote Max Richardson, with no faintest prevision of the circumstances in which the thoughtless lines would be read by his friend. "Artists both of them, brother and sister ; and a rather remarkable couple, I'm told. She seems to have made a hit at the Academy ; and the cousins I'm staying with are very keen about her. I happened to mention that I was writing to a chap in Zermatt, and they begged me to ask if you had heard or seen anything of this Miss Maurice. There's a bit of a romance about her ; that's what has pricked their interest. Seems she was engaged to Sir Roger Bennet this season. A swell in the Art patron line. Lost his heart at first sight. But evidently on closer acquaintance found her rather a handful, and too much of a Bohemian to suit his British taste ! At all events there was a flare-up over something about three months ago, and Sir Roger backed out, politely but definitely. It seems that Miss Maurice was a good deal cut up.

Went off to Zermatt with her brother. And now rumour has it that she is engaged, if not married, to some other chap out there, I suppose by way of a gentle intimation to Sir Roger that he hasn't broken her heart. My cousins are eaten up with curiosity to know if it's true. Women appear to be capable of that sort of thing. But it strikes a mere man as playing rather low down on a luckless devil who has done her no harm: and I don't envy him his hasty bargain, or the repenting at leisure that's bound to follow. Lord, what fools we men are! And how easily we lose our heads over a woman! All except you—the Great Invulnerable, looking down upon our folly from the superior height of a snow-peak. . . ."

Lenox read no further. The last words enraged him, like a blow between the eyes, and set the blood hammering in his temples. It would seem, at times, that Fate selects with fiendish nicety the psychological moment when her arrows will strike deepest, and stick fastest. Thus, when his thirst was at its height, Lenox found the cup dashed from his lips; and that by the hand of his best friend:—a master-stroke of Olympian comedy.

With a curse he flung the letter on to the table.

Wounded love, wounded pride, and baulked desire so clashed in him that clear thought was impossible. He only knew that he had been deliberately deceived, the most intolerable knowledge to a man incapable of deceit: and with the knowledge all the natural savage in him sprang to life. If Richardson had appeared before him in the flesh, it is doubtful whether he could have stayed his hand: the more so, since he believed that the man had written the truth: that this girl—whom it seemed that he had wooed with quite unnecessary reverence—had taken the best he could give, and utilised it as a mere salve for her wounded vanity.

He understood now why her heart had proved more difficult of access than her hand. He had believed it unawakened; had dreamed, as lovers will, of warming it into life with the fire of his own great love: and lo, he found himself forestalled by this execrable man in England. Clearly he had been a fool;—an infatuated fool! He stabbed himself with the epithet: and a vivid memory

of his uncle's stock cynicisms turned the knife in the wound. All the prejudices and tenets of his youth rushed back upon him now: an avenging host, mocking at his discomfiture; narrowing his judgment; blinding him to the woman's point of view.

And while he still stood battling with himself in a vain effort to regain his shaken self-control, the bedroom door opened, and his wife came quickly towards him.

His changed aspect arrested her: and the sight of her facing him thus, with the sunlight in her eyes and on her hair, her young purity of outline emphasised by the simplicity of her dress, so stirred his senses, that, in defiance of pride, the whole heart of him went out to her, claiming her for his own. But it is at just such crises that habit reveals itself as the hand of steel in a silken glove; and before she could open her lips, Jock Lenox had stretched out a ghostly arm from his grave in Aberdeen, and shut to the door of his nephew's heart.

Quita glanced hurriedly from the discarded letter to her husband's face.

"My dear, . . . what *has* gone wrong? You look terrible. Have you had bad news?"

The irony of the question brought a smile to his lips.

"Yes. I have had bad news. Read it for yourself." And he pushed the letter towards her.

"Why? Who is it from?"

"A friend of mine, in England, who seems to know a good deal more about you than I do."

"What on earth do you mean?" she asked sharply.

"You know well enough what I mean. Read that letter if your memory needs refreshing."

Her first instinct was indignant refusal. Then curiosity conquered. Besides, she wanted above all things to gain time: and while she read, her husband watched her keenly, with God knows what of forlorn hope at his heart.

But a twisted truth is more formidable than a lie; and intuition warned Quita that Lenox was in no mood to appreciate the fine shades of distinction between the literal facts and Max Richardson's free translation of the same. His frankly masculine comments fired her

cheeks; and at the sight Lenox could restrain himself no longer.

"By Heaven! You care for that fellow still!" he broke out hotly. "And you had the effrontery to take those solemn words on your lips this morning, with the love of . . . another man in your heart!"

Quita Lenox, whatever her failings, lacked neither spirit nor courage. She threw back her head, and faced his anger bravely.

"How dare you say such things to me? I . . . don't care for him. I—I hate him!"

"Proof conclusive. Indifference kills hatred. No doubt you wanted to convince yourself, and him, that you were indifferent; and to that end you must needs crucify the first man who comes handy. An admirable sample of feminine justice!"

"Eldred, . . . you have no right to speak like that. I won't hear you."

"I have every right; and you shall hear me. It was one thing to know that you could not give me all I wanted at the start. One hoped to set that right, in time. But to accept me because another man's defection had piqued your vanity, . . . God knows how you could dare to do it! I see now why you found me unlike an ordinary lover. No doubt that other fellow—curse him—took full advantage of his privileged position: while to me you seemed a thing so sacred that I hardly dared lay a hand on you. I might have known that a man who is fool enough to put a woman on a pedestal, is bound to pay a long price for his folly."

He was lashing himself more mercilessly than he lashed her: and in the torment of his spirit he did not pause to consider the possible effect of his words on a recklessly impulsive woman.

"Really . . . you are insufferable!" she retorted, her breath coming short and quick. "I have a little pride also; and you had better stop before you push me too far. For I tell you frankly, I don't care enough for you to stand this sort of treatment at your hands."

The counter-stroke stung like a lash. The lines about his mouth hardened, and he straightened himself sharply.

"Pity you were not more frank with me twenty-four hours ago. Then we might both have been spared this morning's ironical service. However, the thing is done now. . . ."

"Indeed, it's *not* done!" she flashed out defiantly. "I have no notion of being your wife on sufferance, I assure you. We are only on the threshold as yet. We need not go a step farther unless we choose. And after what you have said to me, . . . I *do not* choose."

For an instant the man was stunned into silence; then, in a desperate impulse, took a step towards her.

"Quita, . . . you don't realise what you are saying? Nothing can alter the fact that we are man and wife, now and always."

She motioned him from her with an imperious gesture.

"Don't touch me, please. I do realise, perfectly, that we are not free to make any more dangerous experiments. But we are at least free to live and work independently of one another. Of course I know that you can compel me to remain with you,"—her colour deepened on the words.—"But I know also that you have too much chivalry, too much pride, to force yourself upon me against my wish."

"By God, yes!" he answered from between his teeth. "And . . . what is your wish, may I ask?"

For the first time she hesitated, and lowered her eyes.

"I believe our wishes are identical," she said.

"No need to trouble about mine. You can put them out of court altogether."

His tone spurred her to instant decision.

"My wish is to go back to Zermatt at once, by the funicular; and . . . that we should not see one another again. I will accept nothing from you. I can earn my own living, as I have done till now. Thank God, Michael is too blessedly Bohemian to make a fuss, or be horrified at things. He will simply be overjoyed to get me back."

She turned from him hastily; and he stood, like a man paralysed, watching her go. On the threshold of the bedroom door she looked back.

"Don't think of writing to me, or of trying to patch up a reconciliation between us," she said on a softened note. "Mended things are never reliable. I can neither forget

nor forgive what you have said to me to-day, and when you have had time to think things over, you will probably feel thankful that I had the courage to leave you."

The soft closing of the door roused him, and he sprang forward with her name on his lips. Then Pride gripped him; Pride, and the habit of self-mastery hammered into him by his redoubtable uncle. The fact that our spirits thus live and work, deathlessly, in the lives and hearts of those with whom we have come into contact, is a form of immortality too seldom recognised by man.

In the silence that followed, Lenox looked blankly round the empty room:—the room where they should have spent their first evening together. Then the irony, the finality of it all, overwhelmed him, and he sank upon the nearest chair. "What have I done? . . . My God, what have I done?" he breathed aloud. And it is characteristic of the man that, for all his grinding sense of injury, he blamed himself more bitterly than he blamed his wife.

His eye fell on the letter, which, had it contained a bombshell, could scarce have wrought more damage in so short a space of time. Tearing it across and across, he flung it into the fire, and derived a gloomy satisfaction from watching it burn. But though paper and ink were reduced to ashes, neither fire nor steel could annihilate the winged words, thoughtlessly penned, that had altered the course of two lives.

Footsteps in the bedroom brought Lenox again to his feet.

He flung the door open, expecting—he knew what . . .

An apathetic hotel porter was removing Quita's trunk: and nothing that had been said or done in the last half-hour had hurt him so keenly as this insignificant item:—the touch of commonplace that levels all things.

With a gesture he indicated his own portmanteau. "Take that also," he said, and strode out of the room.

At least he had the right to shield her from comment. To all appearance they must leave the place together: and he settled his account with the smiling manageress, adding simply: "Madame has had bad news."

He took a later train down the hill: deposited his trunk

in a hotel bedroom; and spent his wedding-night under the stars; walking, ceaselessly, aimlessly, to deaden the ache at his heart.

Next morning he despatched half a dozen lines to Richardson disowning all knowledge of Miss Maurice's concerns: and three weeks later he sailed from Brindisi without seeing his wife again.

BOOK I.—AFTER FIVE YEARS.

CHAPTER I.

“I, who am Love, burn with too fierce a fire,
 Even if I only pass and touch the soul,
 Life is not long enough to heal the wound.
 I pass, but my touch for ever leaves its mark.
 I, who am Love, burn with too fierce a fire.”

—*Turkish Song.*

MAX RICHARDSON lifted the “chick,” paused on the threshold, and surveyed the empty room.

A bachelor’s room, in a frontier bungalow, boasts little of beauty, less of luxury. The legend of Anglo-India—“Here to-day, and gone to-morrow”—is visible on its nail-disfigured walls, battered camp chairs and tables, supplemented by chance purchases from the “effects” of brother officers, retired, or untimely hurried out of “the day, and the dust, and the ecstasy.”

To the observer for whom one hint of human revelation outweighs in value a warehouseful of inexpressive furniture, a room of this type holds one superlative interest. It is an index of character no less infallible than its owner’s face. Its salient features may tell the same tale as a dozen others in the same station—the tale of a soldier going to and fro in a land of unrest. But its minor details reveal the man beneath the uniform.

There is as much individuality after all in a soldier as in any other specimen of God’s handiwork; even though tradition and the War Office compel him to an external suggestion of having been turned out by the dozen.

The ramshackle room whereon Eldred Lenox had set his seal differed in one notable respect from others of its

type. It contained no picture either of a woman or a horse. The dingy white wall was relieved by groups of barbarous weapons—Thibetan daggers, a pair of wicked-looking kookries, the jezail and Brown Bess of Border tribesmen, and the murderous Afghan knife, whose triangular two-foot blade has disfigured too many British uniforms.

In peaceful contrast to these trophies were one or two rough sketches of the mountain regions beyond Kashmir; desolate stretches of glacier and moraine, or groups of stately peaks, the colouring washed in with a singular sureness of touch. There were also maps, finely executed by hand, of Thibet and Central Asia. To these fresh names and markings were added, from time to time, with a thrill of satisfaction only to be gauged by the man for whom the waste places of earth are a goodly heritage, and who would sooner contribute a new name to the world's atlas than rule a kingdom. Higher up the twenty-foot walls, heads of sambhur, markor, and the lesser deer of the Himalayas showed dimly in the light of one lowered lamp. Skins of bear and leopard, and one or two costly Persian prayer-rugs, partially hid the groundwork of dusty matting, taken over with the bungalow from its former occupant, and in places revealing the stone floor beneath. The broad mantel-shelf was given over to books, a motley crowd in divers stages of dilapidation. 'The Master of Ballantrae' shouldered 'The Queen's Regulations,' one would fancy with a swaggering hint of scorn; a battered copy of the 'Pilgrim's Progress' stood resignedly between Bogle's 'Mission to Thibet' and a technical handbook on Topography, the whole row being propped into position at one end by a great brown tobacco-jar, and at the other by a bronze image of the Buddha in cross-legged meditation—a memento of Lenox's latest expedition to Thibet.

The solitary lamp, its green shade set at a rakish angle, stood upon a spacious writing-table, strewn with closely written sheets of foolscap, pens, pencils, pipes, and books of reference, half a dozen of these last being piled on the floor, close to the writer's chair. It was the table of a man who leaves his work reluctantly, leaves it in such a

fashion that he can take it up again exactly where he left off, without wasting precious time upon preliminaries.

On Lenox's bare deck-lounge a bull terrier, of powerful build and uncompromising ugliness, slept soundly, nose to tail, and on one of the costly prayer-rugs his Pathan bearer slept also. The deep, even breathing of dog and man formed a murmurous duet in the twilight stillness.

All these things Max Richardson noted, with a twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes. Every detail of the room spoke to him eloquently of the man he had not seen for a year. Since his departure on furlough the battery had changed stations, marching across sixty miles of sand desert from Bunnoo to Dera Ishmael Khan, familiarly known as "Dera Dismal," a straggling station a few miles beyond the Indus.

Richardson had arrived from Bombay late that evening, just in time to change and hurry across to the station mess. To his surprise Lenox had not put in an appearance at the mess table, and Richardson, anticipating fever,—the curse of frontier life,—had left early, inquired the way to his Commandant's bungalow, and now stood on the threshold, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his senses. Strange developments must have taken place during his absence, if Lenox—the woman-hater, the confirmed recluse—were actually dining out.

He approached the snoring Pathan and roused him, not ungently, with the toe of his boot. The native sprang up, fumbled at his disarranged turban, salaamed deeply, and finally stood upright, a splendid figure of a man, six feet of him, if his peaked turban were taken into account—hard, wiry, with aquiline features, grey beard, and eyes keen as a sword-thrust; a man without knowledge of fear, cunning and implacable in hatred, but staunchly devoted to the Englishman he served, who, in his eyes, was the first of living men.

"The Captain Sahib—where is he?" Richardson demanded in the vernacular.

"At Desmond Sahib's bungalow for dinner. By eleven o'clock he returneth. Your Honour will await his coming?"

"Decidedly."

Zyarulla turned up the lamp, and proceeded to set whisky, soda-water, and a tumbler among his master's scattered papers. Brutus, at the sound of a remembered voice, tapped the cane chair vigorously with his stump of a tail, without offering to relinquish the one comfortable seat in the room. Richardson sat down beside him, caressed the strong ugly head, and lit a cigar.

The Pathan withdrew, leaving him alone with the dog and the whisky bottle, from which he helped himself liberally. Then, drawing one of the closely written sheets of paper towards him, he fell to reading it with interest and attention. It was a minute geographical record of a recent journey through tracts of mountain country hitherto unexplored, a journey which had gained Lenox the letters C.I.E. after his name. Richardson, while failing to emulate the older man's zeal for wanderings that cut him off for months together from intercourse with his kind, was yet keenly interested in their practical outcome.

The stronger light in which he now sat revealed him as a big fair man, by no means ill-featured, his soldierly figure emphasised by the gunner mess-dress of those days, with its high scarlet waistcoat and profusion of round gilt buttons, in each of which twin flames winked and sparkled. A suggestion of kindly, uncritical contentment with things in general pervaded his face and bearing. The blue eyes were rarely serious for long together; the mouth, under a neatly trimmed moustache, showed no harsh lines, no traces of past conflict. Had the great Overseer of men's destinies not seen fit to guide him to the Frontier, out of reach of demoralising influences, it is doubtful whether he would have escaped the trail of the petticoat, the snare of the grass-widow in determined search of amusement. As it was, he had passed through the critical twenties with a clean defaulter sheet; had established himself as a good soldier and a good comrade, a "friend-making, everywhere friend-finding soul," and the closest among these was the Commandant of his battery—a wholesome and pleasant state of things for both.

He was beginning to weary of geographical detail, when

steps sounded in the verandah, and he was on his feet as Lenox came in.

"Hullo, Dick! Good man to wait for me! Thought I should have seen you before mess, though. What do you mean by not coming here straight?"

"None of my fault, old chap. We were delayed as usual crossing that blamed old Indus. Stuck on a sand-bank for over an hour. Gives a fellow time to count up his sins and renounce the devil, eh? Expected to find you at mess, of course. I wasn't prepared for this sort of upheaval in the natural order of things!"

Lenox stooped to caress Brutus, who was urgently demanding attention.

"Upheavals belong to the natural order of things," he said quietly. "The world would come to a standstill without them. Light a fresh cheroot, and fill up."

He indicated the chair vacated by Brutus, sat down by the writing-table, and picking up a pipe proceeded to clean it out with scrupulous care. Richardson watched him the while, his face grown suddenly thoughtful. Once he leaned forward, as though he had some urgent matter to communicate, but apparently changed his mind, and spoke conversationally between puffs at his cigar.

"Zyarulla said you were at the Desmonds. Is that the cavalry Desmond, the V.C. chap, whose wife was shot by a brute of a Ghazi four years ago?"

"Yes;—a hideous affair. Yet, in the face of his second marriage, one can hardly call it a misfortune. It was one of those evils that had far better happen to a man than not—that's a fact; and there are a good many such on this amazing planet."

"Sounds a bit brutal, though, when the murder of a man's wife is in question."

"Facts are apt to be brutal; even facts relating to the holy estate of matrimony!" Lenox's tone had an edge to it, and Richardson somewhat hastily shifted to another aspect of the subject.

"You are really intimate with these Desmonds,—both of them?"

"Yes. Both of them. I dine there about once a-week, just myself and Desmond's inseparable pal, Wyndham,

who is over there most days. You must call at once. She is Colonel Meredith's sister, a magnificent woman in every way."

"A miraculous one, I should say, to have dragged such an adjective out of you!"

Lenox smiled. "No. Only one of the right sort. The sort that makes fine sons. She has one already; a splendid little chap. The three of 'em are off to Dalhousie early in May, and they have just persuaded me to spend my two months there instead of beyond Kashmir. Mrs Desmond has a misguided notion that I am knocking myself to bits over my work in the interior."

"Deuced sensible woman!" laughed Richardson. "It'll give me the greatest pleasure in life to shake hands with her."

"Come and do it to-morrow then. I'll go along with you."

While he talked Lenox had filled a long German pipe with a bowl of generous dimensions. Now he set a match to it, and as the first blue clouds curled upward a peculiarly aromatic fragrance filled the room.

"That stuff of yours is A1," Richardson remarked, with an appreciative sniff. "Pretty costly, I suppose?"

"Yes. My one extravagance. A special brand that I get out from home, a big batch at a time. Nothing like it for settling a man's nerves in the small hours."

"Do you still sit up over that sort of thing till the small hours?"

"Yes, most nights. What moonshine are you bothering your head about now?"

"Strikes me that sleeplessness of yours must be becoming serious. You look several degrees less fit than you did a year ago, and that's saying a good deal."

Lenox took his pipe from between his teeth, and regarded his subaltern steadily for a few seconds.

"When I need medical advice I'll send for Courtenay," he said, a hint of authority in his bantering tone. "We were discussing tobacco, and a woman; and the conjunction reminds me of an inspired German proverb I happened on the other day. 'God made man first; then He

made woman; then He felt so sorry for man that He made—tobacco.' Supreme, isn't it?"

Lenox chuckled with keen appreciation over the characteristically Teuton bit of cynicism, and Richardson laughed aloud.

"Rather rough on woman, that. You might almost have originated it yourself."

"Wish I had. I'd be proud of it. Stick to tobacco, Dick, and you'll never be tempted to blow your brains out. You may take my word for it, that jar of Arcadian mixture," he specified it with his pipe-stem, "is worth all the women in creation put together."

The bitterness that of late years had so puzzled and distressed his friend sounded again in his tone, and the laughter went out of Richardson's eyes.

But Lenox, absorbed in his own reflections, noticed nothing.

"Let's hear what you've been doing with yourself at home, Dick," he said suddenly. "You're not coherent on paper. I want a few facts. You went abroad latterly, didn't you? Tobogganning, and that sort of thing, I suppose?"

"Yes; went with those cousins I told you of—to Zermatt."

"Delectable spot," Lenox remarked drily, his eyes on the bowl of his pipe. "Hope you enjoyed yourself there?"

"Yes, rather so. Had a rattling good time." Then he leaned forward again, elbows on knees. "Look here, Lenox, old chap; I'm no hand at skirting round a subject, and I feel bound to tell you that I know now . . . what happened there five years ago."

Lenox started so violently that the pipe dropped from his hand. A minimum of sleep and a maximum of tobacco do not tend to steady a man's nerve.

"How the devil d'you come to do that?" he asked, picking up his fallen treasure, and readjusting its contents.

"Well, you see, I happened to be with my cousins when they found out about it. Queer what a deal of trouble some women will take just to satisfy a bit of curiosity."

"Damn their curiosity!" Lenox muttered between his teeth, adding something hastily, "You can spare me the details. Nothing stands a chance against a woman's passion for other people's affairs. Very straight of you to speak out at once. Don't allude to it again, though;—that's all."

"But, Lenox," Richardson persisted, not without misgiving, for it is ill work tampering with the reserve of a Scot, "there's just one question I want to ask you, and I think I have a right to know the truth. I remember writing a certain letter to you that autumn; a rather disparaging letter about—Miss Maurice." The name tripped him up, and he reddened. "I beg your pardon; I ought to say Mrs Lenox, though she still paints under the other name."

"Say Miss Maurice, then, by all means," Lenox answered coldly. "She is welcome to call herself what she pleases so far as I am concerned. Go on."

"I want to know when that letter reached you."

"On the afternoon of the day—I was married."

"Good Lord!" the other ejaculated blankly. "And all that I wrote of,—was it news to you?"

Lenox nodded without looking up.

"My dear fellow, for God's sake don't tell me that a thoughtless letter of mine was responsible—"

Lenox rose and went over to the mantelpiece. The full light on his face was more than he cared about just then.

"You asked for the truth," he said, in a hard, even voice, "and—you have made a clean shot at it. We separated that day. I have neither seen nor heard of her since."

A long silence followed this bald statement of the case. Max Richardson had no words in which to express the pain he felt. Brutus arose, and rubbed himself against his master's legs, as if dimly aware that sympathy of some sort was required of him, and the regular beat of the sentry's footsteps asserted itself in the stillness.

At last Richardson spoke. "Wonder you cared about shaking hands with me again after that."

Lenox came nearer, and took him by the shoulder.

"My dear good Dick," he said quietly, "don't talk rubbish; and oblige me by putting the whole affair out of your head. It's as dead as a door-nail. Has been these five years. After all, you were simply an instrument—a providential instrument," he added grimly—"in the general scheme of things." He paused for a moment; then returned to his station on the hearth-rug.

"You say she has been painting under her own name. Has she been doing much in that line lately?"

"Yes. She has made great strides. Her Academy pictures fetched high prices last year."

"I am glad of that."

The words were spoken with such grave politeness that Richardson looked up as if suspecting sarcasm. But the other's face was inscrutable. "Do you happen to know where she is at present?" he asked, after a pause.

"No. I believe she and her brother travel about Europe. They never came back to England. That's what made my cousins feel sure there was something behind."

"Yes, naturally." Then, with an abrupt return to his usual manner, he added, "Now, old chap, I'm going to send you packing, and get to work. Deuced glad to have you back again. Hodson's a slacker of the slackest. We shan't keep *him* up here much longer, I fancy. Border notions of work don't agree with his delicate digestion! See you again at early parade:—sharp up to time."

And as Richardson's footsteps died into silence, Eldred Lenox went slowly back to the writing-table.

The past five years had not dealt tenderly with this man of surface hardness and repressed sensibilities. The black hair at his temples was too freely powdered with silver, the lines between his brows, and about his well-formed mouth and jaw, were too deeply indented for a man of five-and-thirty. The whole rugged face of him was only saved from harshness by a humorous kindness in the keen blue eyes, that had measured distance and faced death with an equal deliberation; and by a forehead whose breadth made the whole face vivid with intellect and power. He looked ten years older than the inwardly exultant bridegroom who had stood upon that sunlit road

outside Zermatt, waiting to take possession of the woman he had won.

The attempt to relieve bitterness of spirit with the stimulant of incessant work, and the questionable sedative of tobacco strongly tinctured with opium, was already producing its insidious, inevitable result—was, in truth, threatening to undermine an iron constitution while failing conspicuously to achieve the end in view.

After sitting for twenty minutes before a blank sheet of foolscap, Lenox gave up all further effort at mental concentration. A nostalgia of vast untenanted spaces was upon him,—of those great glacier regions where a man could stand alone with God and the universe, could shake himself free from the fret of personal desire. And he had agreed to forgo this—the one real rest and refreshment life afforded him,—to “suffer gladly” the insistent trivialities of hill-station life, merely, forsooth, because a woman had asked it of him. He anathematised himself for an inconsistent weak-minded fool. But he had no intention of breaking his promise to Mrs Desmond.

Since work was out of the question, he pushed his chair back impatiently, left the table, and flung out both arms with a gesture of desperate weariness. Yet sleep was far from him, and he knew it; unless he chose to induce it by the only means ready to his hand.

And to-night he did so choose. In general he had steeled himself to resist the temptation to smoke no more than was needed to quicken and clarify thought. But the short talk with Richardson had set all his overstrained nerves on edge. His sum of sleep in the past week did not amount to twenty-four hours, and for once in a way oblivion must be purchased at any cost.

Going over to the tall tobacco-jar that supported his library, he refilled his pouch with cool deliberation, stretched himself out upon the deck-lounge, and smoked pipe after pipe, till the portion of the drug contained in each accumulated to a perceptible dose. Then the great Dream Compeller took pity upon him, deadening thought, feeling, consciousness itself, till the pipe fell from between his fingers,—and he slept.

CHAPTER II.

“And, at each turn, it seemed as though
Fate some huge net round both did throw
To stay their feet, and dim their sight.”

—W. MORRIS.

THREE weeks later, on a diamond-bright morning of early May, Eldred Lenox was in the saddle, riding at a foot's pace along a strip of a path that links the Strawberry Bank Hotel with Dalhousie's central hill. Brutus trotted soberly to heel, while Shaitan—a black Galloway, half Biluch, half Arab—tossed an impatient head, sneezed several times in succession, and generally declared his intention of taking matters into his own hands, so soon as he should reach the broader expanse of Terah Mall. But Lenox, impelled by an inbred desire to climb, was minded to push on to the higher, emptier levels of Bakrota—the great hill that towered, formidable, directly ahead of him. For the chalet-like dwellings of Dalhousie are scattered sparsely over three hills, Bakrota, Terah, Potrain; and the summit of the last and lowest is crowned by Strawberry Bank Hotel, mainly the resort of captains and subalterns from the four plains stations of the district, doing their two months of signalling, Garrison Class, or of unadulterated loafing, as the case may be.

Lenox himself came under none of these headings. The man had a trick of refusing to be classed collectively, soldier though he was; a trick of isolation, inbred, unconscious, the outcome, perhaps, of much solitary wandering, of intimate association with the uttermost hills. It was as if they had imparted to him something of their own ruggedness, their aloofness, their stoical power of endurance.

A cheery little breeze stirred the branches of horse-chestnuts and rhododendrons, tossed the silver-backed foliage of the ilex, and set the cedar boughs swaying with slow, dignified indolence. Hidden within their depths of shadow, birds and monkeys twittered and chattered; and at intervals there came to Lenox the peculiar long-drawn

note with which the hill villagers call to one another across the valleys. An infectious spirit of jubilation pervaded the air. The sun himself, in these cheerful latitudes, is transformed from an instrument of torture to the golden-locked hero of Norse and Greek legend ; and with every step of the ascent Lenox felt the blood course more swiftly through his veins.

Ilex and rhododendrons, clustering close to the road's edge, shut off the vast prospect on his left ; till, at an abrupt turn of the road, they gave place to a watercourse, descending in a cataract of boulders to the valley below. Then the glorious company of the mountains sprang suddenly into view, lifting scarred heads to heaven, and greeting the new day with a *Te Deum* audible to the spirit, if not to the ear itself. To the spirit of Eldred Lenox these outward symbols of the eternal verities, fit emblems of the stern faith in which he had been reared, spoke with no uncertain voice ; and their message was a message of aspiration, of conquest, of the iron self-mastery and self-restraint indispensable to both. They reminded him, also, that life held many good gifts in atonement for the one gift denied ; that a man might do worse than live and work unhindered by the volcanic forces of passion.

The past five years had, after all, been years of fruitful service to the great country he loved ; the three letters after his name assured him of that. And there remained much more to be done in the same direction ; work that would make unstinted demands upon his energy and fortitude ; work that must, in due time, force him to forget.

Arrived on the Mall, with its far-reaching view of valley and hill, and its outcrop of glittering granite, a word of encouragement set Shaitan into a smart canter that brought them speedily to the half-way corner, whence a densely shadowed road climbs upward to the great forest of Kalatope. The glimpse of sun-splashed path and red pine-stems drew Lenox aside from the open Mall ; and horse and rider passed into the stretch of scented coolness at a brisk trot. The path, little more than six feet wide, was innocent of railing. But much riding in

the Himalayas hardens the nerves to these tight-rope performances, which are part and parcel of life in the hills.

For a while they went steadily forward, well content; till, on rounding a sharp corner, Shaitan stopped dead, his forefeet firmly planted on the roadway, his sensitive ears thrust forward; and Lenox, who had fallen into an absorbing train of thought, found himself confronted by a sufficiently startling reality.

The path ahead of him was blocked by the unwieldy forms of five buffaloes, in charge of a naked brown wisp of humanity four feet high, armed with a no more formidable weapon than a pine branch stripped of its needles. But the crux of the situation lay in the fact that, between the fourth and fifth buffaloes an Englishwoman, in a brown habit, mounted on a restive chestnut pony, was in imminent danger of slipping off the road to certain death among the rocks and boulders below. For the chestnut had succeeded in wrenching his hindquarters outward, his heels were already over the edge, and his rider, leaning well forward, was applying whip and spur with a coolness and vigour that could not fail to excite the man's admiration.

It was a matter of seconds: Lenox could not stop to calculate possible risks. Buffaloes and herd-boy scattered right and left before his furious onset. A swinging blow from his hunting-crop sent two of the bulky beasts scrambling up the inner slope, while Brutus, who found the situation all that heart of dog could desire, sent a third crashing over the khud to the accompaniment of shrill lamentations from the terrified child in charge.

The whole thing passed in a flash; the pony, by a frantic but futile effort to right himself, had just sent a shower of loose stones rattling from under his hind feet, when Lenox, dismounting, gripped the cheek-strap with one hand, the other being occupied with his own reins.

A vigorous forward pull landed the chestnut, panting and quivering, with all four feet on terra firma. But the rider's right arm had fallen limply to her side, and Lenox, looking up, for the first time, into a face deeply shadowed by a wide-brimmed helmet, recognised . . . his wife.

Her breath was still coming in small, quick gasps ; but there was no shadow of fear in her eyes ; no lightest tremor about her close-set lips.

“Great God ! *You !*” he ejaculated under his breath, and involuntarily took a backward step away from her.

At the shock of their encountering glances her cheeks flamed, and she lowered her lids.

“I suppose I may say thank you for that,” she said, and her voice shook ever so little. “A minute later, I should have gone over.”

He nodded, keeping his teeth close, his eyes down ; and a deadweight of silence fell between them.

Small sounds became suddenly self-assertive. The rustle of squirrels along the pine-stems, the monotonous music of the cuckoo, varied by a charge of toy pistol-shots when an inexperienced monkey alighted on a dead twig. Brutus, standing squarely between them, eyed each in turn with critical speculation, his ugly head cocked very much to one side. He instinctively mistrusted all wearers of petticoats, and had found the buffalo incident very much more to his taste.

At length, in desperation, Quita made a movement as if to pass on. But Lenox laid a peremptory hand upon her bridle.

“Tell me, how do you come to be *here* of all impossible places on earth ?”

His voice was harder than he knew, and a slight shadow passed across her face.

“Is it really necessary to explain ?” she asked, coldly.

He relinquished her bridle at that.

“As you please, of course. Only—it is a little awkward our being here together ; and it might be as well to come to some sort of understanding before we separate. Are you up here for the season ?”

“Yes, we have been up all the winter, Michael and I, except for two months at Lahore. When the snow melted we moved to the highest cottage on Bakrota. It is beautiful up there. We came out here eighteen months ago,” she went on a trifle hurriedly, grateful, now that the ice was broken, for the relief of commonplace speech. “I had heard a

good deal about India, you know. I wanted to see it for myself, and if possible put a little of it on canvas."

"And you are not disappointed?"

"No, indeed. It is wonderful beyond words."

They had themselves well in hand now. Each had given the other a false impression at the start, and when two people are living at cross-purposes it is easier to move mountains than to remove that most intangible of all barriers, a false impression.

"And are you—up for the season?" Quita added, after a pause, with a natural touch of hesitancy.

"No. Two months' leave. I am free, therefore, to go elsewhere, if my presence here is in the least degree . . . annoying to you."

"Oh, but that would be a pity. You must have had a special reason for choosing Dalhousie."

"Some friends of mine were coming up, and asked me to come too. But they will quite understand if I say I should prefer to go shooting beyond Chumba."

"Don't say it, though, please. I would really rather you did not put yourself out in the smallest degree on *my* account. Besides," she added, achieving a rather uncertain smile, "we need not meet often, and no one—except Michael—will have any notion of . . . the truth."

"Of course not," he agreed, with glacial dignity. "I was forgetting that you had—discarded my name."

Again the blood flew to her cheeks.

"It seemed the simplest way to avoid possible complications, or unnecessary lies."

"And you flung away—my ring also?"

The question came out in spite of himself, for he had noted her ungloved left hand.

"No. Only I could not very well wear it—under the circumstances."

He stood aside now to let her pass. He himself then mounted, and followed her along the narrow path, raging against the irony of circumstance, as a man bites upon a sore tooth.

On reaching the spaciousness of Bakrota Mall, he had no choice but to ride abreast of his companion. He did so without remark, and since Quita lacked courage to spur

her pony to a canter, they continued to ride thus for a time; each, under an admirable mask of composure, painfully aware of the other's presence.

Speech seemed only likely to widen the gulf between them, and at all times Lenox had a large capacity for silence.

Not so Quita. The last ten minutes had been overcrowded with conflicting emotions; her husband's mute proximity got upon her nerves, and a setting of pine and mountain put a finishing touch to an already intolerable situation. She turned upon him at length, with a small gesture of defiance,—a well-remembered tilt of her chin that pierced him like a sword-thrust.

"Don't feel bound to escort me, please. I am constantly out alone. You may have a long way to go; and we need hardly play at polite conventionalities—you and I."

He glanced at her keenly for a second.

"Thanks; I am in no hurry. But—if you would prefer it?"

"I think it would be less—uncomfortable for us both," she made answer desperately.

"In that case, of course . . ." He gathered up his reins, and lifted his hat. "At least I am glad to have been of some small service to you," he added, quietly. And before her brain or lips could formulate an answer, he had cantered off and vanished round a shoulder of the hill.

CHAPTER III.

"Flower o' the clove,
All the Latin I construe is 'Amo, I love'!"

—BROWNING.

QUITA drew rein and sat motionless for several seconds, looking straight before her.

"I wonder . . . I wonder very much," she mused, "exactly what one may infer from all that. Either he has superb self-control, or I have been wiped off the slate altogether. Most probably the latter."

Then she moved forward slowly, in a state of mind so complicated that, for all her skill in self-analysis, she could not unravel her own sensations. She only knew that she felt jarred through and through, and in a mood to give way to her most dare-devil impulses. But happily for her, no egregious piece of folly was ready to hand at the moment.

Her appearance in India was itself the outcome of an impulse generated by the arrival of two cheques, whose united figures took away her breath; and confirmed by the fact that Michael's relations with the inevitable woman of the moment threatened serious complications—for the woman. For Michael himself serious complications seemed out of all question. Frank Pagan though he was, he lacked, in a peculiar degree, the needful leavening of common clay. Love, as he knew it, was not inevitably based on passion. It was his imagination rather than his heart that took fire, and only under the influence of a dominant emotion did he appear to be capable of the highest achievement. Briefly, he was in love with Love, with that elixir of the heart that stirs the pulses, and quickens inspiration. The object loved stood second. But, so long as the enchantment held, so long as no new impression caught and whirled him in another direction, he honestly believed her to be supreme.

Hence complications, many and embarrassing, which went far to interpret Quita's inconsequent flittings from one continental town to another. For, although the younger by eighteen months, she was many years older in thought and character than her irresponsible brother; and in all matters of moment she took, and was expected to take, the lead.

The key to a perplexing character may often be found in the idiosyncrasies of its nearest and dearest; and this reversal of the natural order of things explained much in Quita that appeared *difficile* and contradictory; explained also her instant gravitation to Lenox, in whom she divined a supply of moral force, and the masculine spirit of protection, both strangely undeveloped in the brother she so devoutly loved. And if at times the uncongenial task of conscience-keeper, and general financier, coupled with com-

plexities, arising from her own false position, had proved something of a strain upon her, Michael had never yet discovered the fact. She understood and shared enough of his Pagan spirit to accept his emotional aids to self-expression at their true value. Do what he might, she could not find it in her heart to be angry with him for long. He carried his fine crop of failings with a cheerfulness and assurance so engaging, that it seemed almost ungracious to be aware of them.

But there were moments when the woman in her rebelled, even to remonstrance, with small result; and when, at length, the arrival of two cheques coincided with Michael's announcement that a certain enamoured Countess obviously expected him to free her from the tyranny of an unloved husband, Quita had laughingly suggested India as an inviting means of escape from entanglements present and to come.

Half a night of meditation had sufficed to set her on the rock of decision. There were possibilities about India not to be named, even to her own heart. There were also empty spaces where white women would be scarce, and where Michael must learn to work without the spur of a fictitious stimulant.

Before the week was out, behold them ploughing through the Mediterranean, leaving the misguided Countess to pacify a suspicious husband. A summer in Kashmir, and a winter in a deserted Himalayan station, had confirmed Quita in the wisdom of their flight; and now her own unnamed possibility had been sprung upon her so suddenly, so strangely, that it took away her breath, and left her as yet neither glad nor sorry, but profoundly disturbed.

Arrived at her own turning, she relieved her feelings a little by setting Yorick at a canter up the twisted scrap of a path that climbed to a wooden doll's house, christened by a poetical Hindu landlord, the "Crow's Nest." Perched on an impossible-looking slope of gravel and granite, eight thousand feet above the Punjab, it seemed only to be saved from falling headlong by an eight-foot ledge of earth, which Quita spoke of proudly as her "garden," and which actually boasted two strips of border

aglow with early summer flowers. Here she found her *sais* squatting on his heels; and springing from the saddle, dismissed Yorick without his customary lump of sugar.

On the steps of the trellised verandah she paused, nerving herself to recount her astonishing adventure in the right tone of voice, and instinctively her brain noted every detail of the view outspread before her. The golden stillness of morning rested on hill and valley like a benediction. Green cornfields, white watercourses, granite promontories, and black patches of forest—all were bathed in warmth and light without languor. The breath of the snows was still ice-cool, and exhilarating as wine; its freshness penetrated and enhanced by the faint sweet scent of Banksia roses, that clothed the rickety woodwork in a fairy garment of green and ivory-white. Each least sound was crystal clear in the rarefied air; the quarrelling of two sparrows, the high-pitched chatter from the compound behind the cottages, the crooning of ring-doves among the pines. Butterflies, like detached flowers, fluttered in and out. A faint breeze stirred the roses, so that an occasional creamy petal fell circling to the ground.

But for the first time Quita Maurice felt out of tune with it all. A disturbing element had thrust itself into her life, deranging its perspective, altering its values. She felt badly in need of common human sympathy, and the exalted calm of these high latitudes irritated rather than soothed her.

With an impatient sigh she turned to enter the house.

The glass doors of the centre room stood open, a characteristic room, half drawing-room, half studio; furnished mainly with two large easels, painting-stools, and cane chairs, yet bearing in every detail the stamp of Quita's iridescent personality. A pianette, a violin, a litter of music, and back numbers of the 'Art Journal' occupied one corner. A revolving bookcase showed an inviting array of books. Her own canvas was hidden by draperies of dull gold silk, and beside it, on a carved stool, sprays of Banksia roses and honeysuckle soared plumelike from a vase of beaten bronze.

Before the second easel Michael stood, with his back towards her, brush and palette in hand, head critically tilted, his velveteen coat sagging a little from rounded shoulders. Absorbed in his picture, he was quite unconscious of her presence. This irritated her also to an unjustifiable extent. Her vanity had suffered recent shock, and an unreasoning longing possessed her to be cared for, to be supremely needed.

“*Michel!*” she cried imperatively from her post in the doorway,—Michael objected strongly to the harsher pronunciation of his name; and the two seldom spoke English when alone. “Is it necessary to fire a salute before you will deign to be aware that one has come back?”

At that he turned quickly about, and treated her to a burlesque bow of apology.

“*Mais non, chérie . . .* a thousand pardons! But it is no fault of mine that you have the footfall of a bird!”

She laughed in spite of herself.

“Keep those sort of speeches for Miss Mayhew. She may possibly believe them. It would be all the same if I had the footfall of an elephant! Nothing short of siege-guns would distract your mind from that picture. It has bewitched you.”

“*Eh bien!* When it is complete it will be a masterpiece,” he assured her loftily.

“No doubt! But, in the meanwhile, it may interest you to know that except for a genuine miracle, I should not be here at all.”

“*Mon Dieu!* But what happened? Tell me.”

Flinging aside palette and brushes, he caught her hands in his, and it cost her an effort to preserve her lightness of tone.

“Nothing blood-curdling, since you see me without bruise or scratch. Only Yorick and I got tangled up with a herd of buffaloes on the Kajiar Road. In his fright, the little fool slipped half over the khud, and if a knight-errant had not fallen from heaven, in the nick of time, we should both be lying somewhere in the valley by now, ‘spoiling a patch of Indian corn’!”

Maurice frowned. “Don’t be gruesome, Quita.”

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be. I was only quoting that uncannily clever Kipling boy at Lahore. Yorick and I were slithering over, just like the loathly Tertium Quid on the Mushobra Road ; and there is plenty of Indian corn in the valley ! I thought of it, all in a flash, and it wasn't enlivening, I assure you."

"That is enough," Maurice protested hastily. Tragedy oppressed him to the verge of annoyance. "But tell me —who *was* the knight-errant, that I may at least shake hands with him."

The blood tingled in Quita's cheeks, and she went quickly forward into the room.

"I doubt if you will want to do that when you know his name," she said. "It was—Captain Lenox."

"*Nom de Dieu !* That fellow!" Michael flung out his hands with a dramatic gesture of despair. "What is he doing here, *par exemple*, instead of poking about among his glaciers ? Now I suppose he will not rest till he has taken you from me again."

The frank selfishness of the man's first thought was so characteristic that Quita smiled. But her smile had an edge to it.

"Set your mind at rest on that point," she said. "He is no more anxious to claim—his property, than I am to be claimed."

"Curse him ! Did he dare to tell you so ?"

Quita lifted her head ; a spark of anger flashed in her eyes.

"You seem to forget that he is a gentleman, and—my husband." Then, recovering herself, she added more gently, "There are ways and ways of telling things, *mon cher*, and since I have relieved your anxiety, we need not mention him again. The subject is distasteful to me. Now, I want to see how you have got on with the masterpiece !"

She went to the easel ; and Maurice, following, stood at her elbow anticipating the sweet savour of praise. For the picture was a notable bit of work, daringly simple in colouring and design, yet arresting, convincing, alive.

It represented a young girl, with the promise of womanhood on her gravely sweet lips, and in the depths of her

eyes, half-sitting upon the crossed rails of the verandah. An ivory-white dress of Indian silk fell in shimmering folds to her feet. A dawn of clear amber made a tender background to the dull gold of her hair. Trailing sprays of the rose that ran riot over the house drooped towards her; and a pine branch, striking in abruptly, made an effective splash of shadow in an atmosphere palpitating with the promise of fuller light. The only intense bit of colour in the picture was the violet blue of Elsie Mayhew's eyes—eyes that looked into you and through you to some dream-world unsullied by the disconcerting realities of life, which seemed only awaiting the given moment to rush in and dispel the dream. For, as the sky gave promise of fuller light, so did the girl's spirit seem hovering on the verge of fuller knowledge.

Such at least was Quita's thought, as she stood silently appraising her brother's work; and it brought a contraction to her throat, a stinging sensation to her eyeballs.

"I congratulate you, Michel," said she softly. "You have never done anything to equal that. It is more than a portrait. It is an interpretation, or will be, when it is complete. Her hopeless little 'Button Quail' of a mother won't understand it in the least, but Colonel Mayhew will. I wonder if you know yourself how much you have put into it?"

"I know that I have put some superlative workmanship into it," he answered, looking upon the creation of his hand and brains with critical grey-green eyes, curiously out of keeping with an ill-formed and unrestrained mouth.

"Indeed you have. The thing is full of atmosphere, and your flesh tints are worthy of Perugino. You mean to give it to her?"

"*Cela va sans dire.* She wants it as a present for her father."

"Why not hang it first, at Home?"

"Afterwards, perhaps. If she permits."

"It is a big gift, Michel. It would fetch a high price; and we need money."

Michael shrugged his shoulders with all an artist's scorn of "the common drudge."

"Since when have you turned commercialist, *petite*

sœur? If it is a question of starving, I can always paint another. I do not sell this one, *voilà tout*. If it were only mine, I would have five lines of Swinburne under it for title. They express her to perfection. Listen—

‘Her flower-soft lips were meek and passionate,
For love upon them like a shadow sat,
Patient, a foreseen vision of sweet things,
A dream with eyes fast shut and plumeless wings,
That knows not what man’s love or life shall be.’”

On the last line his voice deepened to an impassioned tone that brought an anxious crease to Quita’s forehead.

“I wonder which you are most in love with,” she said on a forced note of lightness. “The girl herself, or your picture of her? Do you ever treat her to such rhapsodies in the flesh? They must be a little embarrassing for a child of twenty!”

“Your ‘child of twenty’ is already very much a woman, and I have the right to say to her what I please.”

“Not altogether, *mon ami*—unless—”

But Michael dismissed criticism as serenely as he dismissed consequences. The episode of the Countess was as though it had never been.

“I have no concern with ‘unless.’ Such uncomfortable words are wiped out of my vocabulary. They affect me like a false note in music.”

Quita laughed. “No one knows that better than I do! But speaking simply as a woman, I know also that the man who opens our eyes to the passionate side of things involves himself in a big moral responsibility. And even you cannot shelve the moralities altogether.”

“*Cela dépend*. If the moralities hamper one’s art, the shelf is the best place for them in my opinion.”

His sister did not answer at once. Michael’s confession of faith was not a matter to be lightly dismissed; for the simple reason that he lived up to it in so far as human inconsistency will allow any man to live up to his faith, however ignoble.

“I sometimes wonder whether one’s art really does gain by that form of freedom,” she said thoughtfully, “or only—one’s consuming egotism.”

But the suggestion was rank heresy, and Michael would have none of it.

"Really, Quita, you are as enlivening as a Lenten service! Upon my soul, I'd sooner you turned vegetarian than developed a conscience! But believe me, I am devoted to Miss Mayhew. She is enchanting. A wild rose, half-open, with the dew still on her petals. Metaphorically, I am at her feet. Does that satisfy you, *ma belle*?"

"It might, if I had not heard a good deal of it before. You are chronically devoted to one or other of us, my beloved Pagan! That's the root of the difficulty."

In atonement for directness of speech, she laid hands upon his shoulders, and smiled very tenderly into his face.

"I am chronically devoted to you, *cœur de mon cœur*," he declared in all sincerity. "That is the only form of it I have yet known."

His reward was a butterfly kiss between the eyebrows.

"Out of your own mouth you stand condemned! It is quite charming for me; and for the rest—one accepts the unavoidable! But in sober prosaic truth, Michel, Elsie Mayhew is a great deal too good for you; and that nice Engineer boy, Mr Malcolm, is desperately in earnest about her. I have seen his whole heart in his eyes when he looks at her——"

"*Mais, ma chère*, what a serious derangement of his organism!" Michael broke in with irreverent laughter. "When all's said, the heart is a practical machine—even the heart of a lover, and a little of it must have been left below for pumping purposes!"

She stamped her foot in helpless irritation.

"Michel, how exasperating you are! Can't you see that I am in earnest?"

"Like my incomparable rival?" he queried unabashed. "Poor devil! I wish him no harm. Is it my fault, after all, if the lady prefers a man who is not cut out on a pattern, and filed for reference at the War Office? He is immaculate, *ce cher Malcolm*, from his parting to the toes of his boots. And, *ma foi*, he is clean—like all that redoubtable army of British officers—aggressively clean,

inside and out, which one cannot always say with truth ! But he has no finesse, no *savoir faire* where women are concerned. If he is in earnest let him try weapons more compelling than his *beaux yeux*. A man was not given slip and a pair of hands for eating and fighting merely ; and if he cannot turn them to good account, he deserves the fate that will assuredly be his."

Quita's sigh, as she turned impatiently away, may have arisen from a passing thought of that other, who had also been remiss in putting lips and hands to their legitimate use, and had reaped disaster accordingly. She took off her helmet, as if suddenly aware of its weight, and tossed it into a chair.

"Is Miss Mayhew giving you another sitting after our sunrise picnic, on Dynkund, to-morrow ?" she asked in a changed voice.

"Yes, and I intend that she shall stay on for tiffin also."

"Then I will persuade Major Garth to follow suit, so that we may be a *parti carré*. And now, as it's more than half-past breakfast-time, we might begin to think about sitting down ! I believe Major Garth is riding up this morning with some books I lent him, and I must get forward a little with my picture before he comes."

"His office hours seem to have become a negligible quantity lately," Maurice remarked casually, his eyes on Elsie's face.

"Yes, I told him so a few days ago, apparently without much effect. Major Garth is one of those men who combine a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of work with the capacity for securing good appointments, which is quite an achievement—of its kind. I suppose I must gently point out to him that now the station is waking up it would be well to consider the proprieties a little more than we have done so far ; or the 'Button Quail' will be forbidding Elsie the house. She is volubly disapproving already, denounces him as a 'dangerous man' . . . delectable adjective ! But the cackle of Quails is nothing to me. So long as the man behaves himself, and amuses me, I shall continue to see just as much of him as I think fit."

Major Garth, it may be mentioned in passing, had lately secured the coveted post of Station Staff Officer. He also had spent the winter months in Dalhousie; and he could by no means be reckoned among the men who fail with women through undue fastidiousness in regard to ways and means.

CHAPTER IV.

“A bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.”—*Eccles.*

“TIRED already? Nonsense! The air at this height is pure elixir vitae. It gives one a foretaste of the joy of being disembodied! I feel five years younger since I left the bungalow.”

“And I, on the other hand, feel uncomfortably aware that I shall never see the forty-third milestone again!” And, seating himself deliberately on the trunk of a fallen deodar, James Garth looked up at his companion, where she stood above him on a rough-hewn block of granite, her alpenstock held high like a shepherd’s crook, the slender, shapely form of her outlined upon a sky already athrill with the foreknowledge of dawn.

Standing thus, lightly poised, impatient of delay, slim and upright as a young birch-tree, a cluster of roses at her waist, her expressive face shadowed by the wide-brimmed helmet, she appeared triumphantly, girlishly young, for all her eight-and-twenty years. Her cheeks glowed; irrepressible animation sparkled in her eyes. The shock and jar of twenty-four hours ago seemed forgotten, as though they had never been, for Quita Maurice was blessed with the happy faculty of living vividly and exclusively in the present, and the exhilaration of ascent, the prospect of watching the world’s awakening from a pine-crowned pinnacle, nine thousand feet up, were, for the moment, all-sufficing.

James Garth, in his upward glance, appraised every detail of her dress and person; savoured to the full her very individual—if, at times, thorn-set—charm. He was a connoisseur of woman—of their moods, their minor vanities, their methods of defence and attack—this man whose career had been mainly remarkable for a succession of sentimental friendship, innocuous and otherwise.

During the past six months he had spent an infinite deal of leisure in a pastime whose every move and counter-move he knew by heart, and for the first time in eighteen years he had found himself out of his reckoning.

An element little known to him had upset the balance of power. He was beginning to be aware that, for all his unquenchable self-assurance, he had never for one moment felt sure of this woman, whose companionship was so accessible, and whose inner self stood always just out of reach, airy, impregnable, and by a natural sequence, the more entirely desirable. It had taken Garth some months to realise the truth: and on this morning of golden promise he decided that Quita Maurice must be made to realise it also.

Quita herself, meeting the eloquence of his eyes with that frank look of hers which had been largely responsible for the unprecedented turn of affairs, was vainly trying to repress a mischievous enjoyment of the fact that her companion was patently out of his element; that his drawing-room attitudes and demeanour struck an almost ludicrous note of discord with the untamed majesty of his surroundings.

Face, figure, and point-device attire, culminating in a buttonhole of freshly picked violets, stamped him as a man mentally and physically addicted to the levels of life; a soldier of carpet conquests and ball-room achievements. A brow not ill-formed, and a bold pair of eyes, more green than brown, suggested some measure of cultivated intelligence, without which Quita could not have endured his companionship for many hours together. But the proportions of his thick-set figure, and a certain amplitude of chin and jaw, bewrayed him; classed him indubitably with the type for whom comfort and leisure are the first and last words of life. The fact that he had ascended a

matter of fifteen hundred feet before daybreak, and that with no more than the mildest sense of martyrdom, was proof conclusive that the balance of power had been very completely upset; and it is quite in keeping with the delicate irony of things that the one woman who had succeeded in upsetting it was, at that moment, dissecting him with the merciless accuracy of the artist.

"Poor man!" she remarked, sympathetically. "I'm afraid I have been treating you rather mercilessly; and you don't look particularly happy sitting on that deodar, either! I suppose I may consider it something of a triumph to have dragged a high priest of the arm-chair unprotesting up to the heights at this unearthly hour of the morning?"

"A triumph exclusively your own," he answered, with lingering emphasis. "No other woman in the world could have achieved as much."

Quita glanced at him quizzically.

"I honestly wonder," she said slowly, "if you could reckon up at random how many times you have said that sort of thing before."

Garth reddened visibly; less at the justice of the retort than at the humiliation of being put out of countenance by a woman from whom he desired no less a gift than the gift of herself.

"Well, I never meant it fair and square before," he declared stoutly. Whereat, to his consternation, she laughed outright.

"You seem to have a high opinion of my powers of credulity! That is too big a compliment for me to digest without salt! But I think we have talked nonsense enough for one while, and it's growing lighter every minute. Are you coming on? Or would you sooner sit there in peace while I push up to the top?"

The suggestion brought him to his feet.

"No, by no means. When I set out to do a thing, I go through with it."

"Rally your forces, then, for one more spurt of climbing. Time is precious. Can you really manage this formidable boulder, or would you like a hand up?"

She laughingly flung out her free left hand; and the

mockery in her clear voice fired the man to make good his opportunity. He took prompt possession of the proffered hand, crushing it in his with unnecessary force, but made no attempt to scale the rock ; while she, instantly perceiving his manœuvre, sprang down to his side and freed herself with imperious decision. Then she turned upon him, her head held high, a spark of genuine scorn in her eyes ; and he realised that he was dealing with no mere coquette, whose elusiveness might be taken as an inverted form of encouragement, but with a woman of character and spirit.

“ Major Garth,” she said in a tone of quietness more cutting than anger, “ when I pay a man the compliment of going out alone with him, I take it for granted that he is in the habit of behaving like a gentleman. I should be sorry to find myself mistaken in your case.”

Without giving him time to answer, she leapt lightly on to her deserted rock, leaving him to follow, if he chose.

And he did choose. For her scorn, while it stung his vanity to the quick, fired his lukewarm blood with a lust of conquest far removed from his usual cool-headed assurance at the critical moment. He seemed destined to experience more than one new sensation this morning ; and new sensations rarely came amiss to this epicure of the emotions.

Being quite incapable of emulating his companion’s chamois method of cutting corners, and striking out a direct line for the summit, he did not succeed in coming up with her till the arduous feat was accomplished,—the Pisgah height attained. Here he found her established on a slab of granite, hands loosely clasped over her knee, helmet tilted a little backward, forming a halo round her head and face. He arrived in a very unheroic state of breathlessness, and she greeted him with a frankly forgiving smile.

“ That last bit came rather hard on you, I’m afraid. But surely all this makes ample amends.”

She included in a wide sweep of her arm the superb panorama of hill and valley and far-stretching plain, robed in a haze of its own fierce breath, through which a silver network of rivers could be faintly discerned in the crescent

light. Uprising from this blue interminable distance, the first crumplings of the foothills showed like purple velvet, and from these again the giant Himalayas—the “home of the greater gods”—sprang aloft, in a medley of lovely lines and hues, till they reached the uttermost north where the hoar head of Nanga Parbat soared twenty-five thousand feet into the blue.

Quita motioned her companion to another rock, a little distance behind her own.

“Sit down there, and recover your lost breath,” she commanded, gently. “I would rather not talk for the present, if you don’t mind. It would jar somehow. I daresay you understand what I mean.”

He was many leagues removed from understanding: but he obeyed in silence, wondering at himself, no less than at her. And straightway Quita forgot all about him, in the mere rapture of looking, and of feeling in every fibre the incommunicable thrill of dawn.

A passionate nobility, freedom, and power breathed from the wide scene. Already a pearly glimmer pulsed along the east; already the mountains were awake and aware. Peak beyond peak, range beyond range, a shadowy pageant of purple and grey, they swept upwards to the far horizon, where the still wonder of the snows shone pale and pure against the dovelike tones of the sky. Away across the valley, where night still brooded, Kalatope ridge, serrated and majestic of outline, made a massive incident of shadow amid the tenderer tints around. The great hushed world seemed holding its breath in expectation of a miracle—the unconsidered miracle of dawn.

A Himalayan dawn is brief, as it is beautiful. One after one, the snow-peaks passed from the pallor of death to the glow of life. Then, sudden as an inspiration, the full splendour of morning broke, sublime as the eternity from which it came. Rapier-like shafts of light pierced the purple lengths of shadows that engulfed the valley. Threading their way through fir and deodar and pine, they flung all their radiant length across a rock-studded carpet of fir-needles and moss, and rested, like a caress, upon Quita’s face and figure.

At last, with long breath of satisfaction, she forced her

sun-dazzled eyes and mind back to earth; only to discover that Garth had risen and was standing at her side. The man had seen and studied her in many moods. But never in one so exalted, so self-forgetful, as the present; and to the varied new experiences of the morning was added a wholesome sense of his own unworthiness to lay a hand upon her. In that illumined moment he was vouchsafed a glimpse into the temple of Love; a temple he had desecrated and defiled time and again; whose holy of holies he had never entered, nor ever could.

“Does it really mean as much as all that to you?” he asked, still watching her, with unusual concentration.

She nodded, and a soft light gleamed in her eyes. “Yes—as much as that, and more—infinitely more. One’s cramped mind and heart seem to need expanding to take it all in.”

Garth’s smile lacked its habitual touch of cynicism.

“I am afraid even sunrise on Dynkund in your company has no power to lift me to such flights of ecstasy.”

“I never supposed it had, you poor fellow! I wouldn’t change souls with you for half a kingdom. Nearly every day of my life I thank the goodness and the grace that dowered me with the spirit of an artist. Think what a heritage it is to be eternally interested in a world full of people who seem to be eternally bored!”

“I suppose you include me in that noble army of martyrs?”

“Decidedly. It is one of your worst faults.”

“At least I never commit it in your presence.”

She laughed, and lifted her shoulders.

“At least you know how to flatter a woman! But, for goodness’ sake, don’t let’s talk trivialities in the face of these stupendous mountains.”

“And why not? In my opinion, the trivialities of a human being are worth more than the grandeur of a mountain, any day. But, seriously, Miss Maurice—if you can be serious with me for five minutes—does all this, and the Art in which you live and breathe, so satisfy you that you feel no need for the far better things a man might have to offer you?”

She frowned, and looked with sudden intentness at a distant object in the valley.

"Yes—seriously—it does. What is more, it seems to me that most men set too high a value on what they have to offer a woman, and that a good many of us are better off without it."

Garth set his teeth, and did not answer at once. That his first genuine attempt at a proposal of marriage should be thus cavalierly nipped in the bud was disconcerting, to say the least of it.

"But not you—of all women," he protested, incredulously. "Are you quite sure you understand what I mean? Won't you give me a chance to explain——?"

Her low laughter maddened him.

"Oh, no—please have mercy on me! Explanations are the root of all evil! If only people had not such a passion for explaining themselves, there would be fifty per cent fewer misunderstandings in the world. Don't you know the delightful story of a zealous mother reading the Bible to her boy, and explaining profusely to bring it within the scope of his small mind, and when she asked him, anxiously, 'Are you quite sure you understand it all, darling?' he answered, with the heavenly frankness of childhood, 'Yes, beautifully, mummy—except when you explain.' That's my feeling exactly; so we'll skip the explanations, if you don't mind."

He stifled an oath, and flung his half-smoked cigar down the khud.

"You're enough to drive a sane man distracted!" he declared hotly, and was not a little surprised at his own vehemence.

"No, no! That's exaggeration, I assure you. The strong wine of the morning has got into your head. Do be reasonable now, and keep personalities at arm's length. I detest them."

He moved away for a space; then, turning on his heel, came back again.

"At least you don't object to my companionship?" he said, ignoring her request.

"Of course not, so long as it amuses you to bestow it upon me."

"Amuses me! God in heaven, what makes you so hopelessly detached?"

"Some radical defect in me, I suppose. The Pagan strain, perhaps, that comes out so strong in Michael. I believe I am incapable of *les grandes passions*. But that does not prevent me from being a good friend, and a constant one, as you will find, if you care to test me in that capacity. Now you may sit down here," she patted her slab of rock invitingly, "and discourse about anything you please, except myself. Egoist though I am, I have had enough of the subject for to-day!"

And Garth—the man of surface emotions and ready tongue—found nothing to say in answer to this kindly but inexorable dismissal of his unspoken suit. He had no choice but to accept the inevitable, and the proffered seat. But the permission to discourse about anything he pleased left him dumb, and it was Quita herself who guided their talk into a less personal channel.

"Have you had any new arrivals at the Strawberry Bank lately?" she asked, conversationally; and the question was more relevant to the tabooed topic than Garth was likely to guess. He lived close to the hotel, and dined there when he felt convivially disposed.

"Yes; two new fellows came up this week. A doctor from Mooltan and a Gunner from 'Dera Dismal,'—the Thibet man,—Lenox, who seems to be making a reputation of sorts. But he looks a wreck. Smokes like a chimney; and is apparently working himself to death: a thankless form of folly."

"Perhaps. Yet India needs a few unsparing workers —like Captain Lenox."

She spoke with studied indifference; but her fingers were busy uprooting a patch of moss.

"Oh yes, India has a healthy appetite for unsparing workers! She is a grasping harridan, who demands all and offers nothing. She devours the lives of men who are foolish enough to lose their hearts to her, and wrecks their bodies by way of thanks."

Quita's lips lifted in the merest shadow of a smile. "Aren't you a little ungrateful to her? She has been fairly merciful to you!"

"I have never given her the ghost of a chance to be otherwise! I don't believe in overwork, plus the Indian climate. More men kill themselves by a happy mixture of both than the importance of their achievements justifies. I was chaffing Lenox only last night about his leaning towards that unrecognised form of suicide; and all the answer I got was that a man might die of a more degrading disease. You never by any chance get a rise out of old Lenox!"

"Do you know him well?"

"As well as it's possible to know a fellow who lives with all his shutters up. And in any case an anchorite, and a woman-hater, would never be much in my line. The symptoms appear to have developed in the last few years. Not without reason, as I happen to know."

"What do you happen to know?"

The question came almost in a whisper; but Garth, who had all a woman's weakness for other people's affairs, was too intent upon his ill-gotten scrap of gossip to observe his companion's slight change of manner.

"Why, that it's simply a case of *cherchez la femme*, as usual," he answered, lightly. "I believe it's a fact that he went so far as to marry one of these women he affects to despise, when he was on leave five years ago."

Quita started, and bit her lips. "What reason can you have for believing anything . . . so improbable?"

"My dear lady, marriage is never improbable. You women have a knack of tripping up the most unlikely subjects! In this case, I had the details from an old friend of mine. She happened to be stopping at the same hotel as Lenox at Zermatt. Then one morning he disappeared; and, as she had taken rather a fancy to him, she tried to find out what had become of him. After a good deal of questioning, it transpired that he had been seen coming out of the English church with a lady; and further inquiry revealed the fact that an officer named Lenox had been quietly married there the day before. Naturally, she scented a romance, and was keen to know more. But he seemed to have vanished outright. Then ten days later she met him on the station platform, travelling alone, and obviously down on his luck. He told

her he was off to join his battery in India: nothing more. Problem: What, in the name of mystery, had he done with the lady?"

At that Quita rose abruptly, her cheeks on fire, her whole frame tense with suppressed agitation.

"Oh, stop—stop. I can't stand any more!" she protested, in a smothered voice; and at once Garth was beside her, contrite and amazed.

"Miss Maurice—what have I said to upset you so?"

"It's not your fault. You couldn't help it," she answered, without looking up. "But—you were telling me my own story!"

"Good Lord! Then—it was *you*?"

"Don't say any more, please. I never meant to speak; only—one had to stop you—somehow. It's time we went back to the others now. I am sure you must be wanting your breakfast. And remember"—she faced him at last, with brave deliberation—"I trust you, as a gentleman, never to speak of this again—to me, or to any one else."

And Garth bowed his head, and followed her, in a bewildered silence.

CHAPTER V.

"He that getteth a wife beginneth a possession; a help like unto himself, and a pillar of rest."—*Ecclesiasticus*.

ELDRED LENOX stood alone in the Desmonds' diminutive drawing-room, patiently impatient for companionship more responsive than that of cane chairs and tables, pictures and a piano. Yet the room itself, with its atmosphere of peace and refinement, gave him a foretaste of the restfulness that made Honor Desmond's companionship a growing necessity to this man, whose heart and brain were in a state of civil war. It was filled with afternoon sunlight, with the faint, clean fragrance of violets, wild roses, and maiden-hair fern, and its emptiness was informed and pervaded by countless suggestions of

a woman's presence; a woman versed in that finest of all fine arts, the beautifying of daily life.

In this era of hotels, clubs, and motors, of days spent in sowing hurry and reaping shattered nerves, the type is growing rarer, and it will be an ill day for England's husbands and sons, nay, for her supremacy among nations, if it should ever become extinct. For it is no over-statement, but simple fact, that the women who follow, soon or late, in the track of her victorious arms, women of Honor Desmond's calibre—home-loving, home-making, skilled in the lore of heart and spirit—have done fully as much to establish, strengthen, and settle her scattered Empire as shot, or steel, or the doubtful machinations of diplomacy.

A half-acknowledged conviction of this truth was undermining Eldred's skin-deep cynicism; and it did not tend to alleviate his renewed sense of loss. A week had passed since his astounding experience on the Kajiar Road; a week in which the hours of sleep had been a more negligible quantity than usual; in which he had fought squarely against an imperative need to escape from the haunting consciousness of his wife's presence, and had been squarely beaten. His present need to see and speak with Honor Desmond was an ultimate confession of that defeat.

On reaching the bungalow, he was told that the Mem-sahib had gone out with the Chota Sahib, but would doubtless be back before long, and had decided to await her return. During his ride with her that morning, he had not been able to bring himself to speak. But this time he intended to go through with the ordeal. He felt too restless to sit down; and she did not keep him waiting long.

Footsteps and low voices, punctuated with silver laughter, heralded her coming, and a few minutes later she entered, carrying a pocket edition of herself, who clung about her neck, and pressed a cool rose-petal cheek against her own.

Lenox had described her as a magnificent woman. A Scot may generally be trusted not to overstate his facts; and certainly Honor Desmond, in those radiant early days of marriage, deserved no less an adjective. Height, and a

buoyant stateliness of bearing, lent a regal quality to her beauty. Her grey-blue eyes under very level brows were the eyes of a woman dwelling in the heart of life, not merely in its outskirts and pleasure-grounds.

She expressed no surprise at seeing Lenox again so soon. Come when he might, his presence was accepted as a matter of course; the surest way to put a man at his ease.

"So sorry I kept you waiting," she said simply, and the hand she gave him was at once soft and strong,—an epitome of the woman. "Theo was lunching out with Colonel Mayhew—they are both very full of that book of his on the Hill Tribes—and *I* have been devoting most of my time to this very exacting person!"

Lenox caressed the child's red-gold hair with a cautious reverent hand, and a contraction of envy at his heart.

"What a beautiful little chap he is! Begins to look an out-and-out Meredith already. Desmond must be tremendously proud of him."

She smiled and pressed him closer.

"He is; and I'm nearly as bad! One son, three fools, you know! Poor little Paul, it's not fair to call him names when he can't hit back."

"You called him after Wyndham?"

"Yes. They're like brothers, those two. Now let me get rid of him, and we'll have a quiet talk till Theo comes back. Sit down and smoke, please."

He complied; and she, returning, established herself beside her work-table, and took up an elaborate bit of smocking without question or remark.

His trouble and stress of mind were very evident to her; but she was one of those rare women who are chary of questions—who, for all their desire to help and serve, never approach too near, or say the word too much, which was, perhaps, one reason why men found her so restful, and instinctively talked to her about themselves.

But Lenox was long in beginning.

By imperceptible degrees, this unsought gift of friendship was melting the morsel of ice at his heart; was reviving in him, against his will, that keen appreciation of a cultivated woman's sympathy and companionship, which, among

finely tempered men, is as potent a factor in the shaping of destinies as passion, or hot-headed emotion.

For a while he permitted himself the bitter-sweet satisfaction of merely watching her where she sat, in a shaft of sunlight, that struck golden gleams through the burnished abundance of her hair ; of noting the grace and dignity of her pose, and speculating as to the nature of her thoughts. His wife's reckless impulse on that fateful September day was bringing him now within measurable distance of a very human danger. The deep, passionate heart of him, crushed and stifled during the past five years, was in no safe state to be brought into contact with a lighted match. But of this danger he was, by his very nature, sublimely unaware.

Finally he took the short pipe from his lips and spoke.

"Of course you know I have something definite to say, or I should hardly have the cheek to inflict myself on you twice in the twenty-four hours."

She looked up and smiled. "You're evidently in one of your bad moods, or you would not vex me by putting it like that."

"Sorry to vex you, but I *am* in a bad mood ; have been for the last week ; so you must make allowances. I can't sleep, and a restless devil inside me won't let me settle to steady work. Nerves, I suppose. I don't look a likely subject, do I ? But they give me a deal of trouble at times ; and I came to say that I must go back on my arrangement with you and Desmond and clear out of this before the end of the week."

"Oh, but surely that would be a great pity ; a great disappointment to us both. Is it really a case of 'must' ?"

"I think so."

"And you have only been here a fortnight ! Isn't it rather early days to give in ?"

"Very early days—as the case must appear to you ; and the evil of it is that I have no power to make things clearer. Think me an overwrought fool ; a broken-backed corn-stalk, if you choose. It will hurt, of course ; but it can't be helped."

He spoke with undisguised bitterness, and, laying down

her work, she looked at him straightly, a great compassion in her eyes.

"You misunderstand the fundamentals of friendship if you can talk like that," she said gently. "It is rooted in reticence in respect for another's individuality. Whatever you choose to do, you may be very sure that I shall neither doubt your good reasons, nor seek to know them. That is my idea of what it means to be a friend."

"I stand rebuked," he answered gravely, "and I'm not likely to forget what you have said."

"At the same time," she added in a lighter tone, "one is only human! And I can't let you leave Dalhousie without a word of protest—even if it is useless." She hesitated. "May I speak straight?"

"As straight as you please. I should prefer it."

"Well, I think that if it is a case of nerves, or—worry of any kind, nothing can be worse for you than your own society. Such amusement as we can offer you up here may be frivolous and insignificant enough, but, believe me, it is far better for you just now than the most sublime snowfields and glaciers at the back of Beyond! You know you are free to come here whenever you please. Theo enjoys having you; so do I. And I'm sure it's good for you to fraternise with something more human than a mountain!"

He smiled, but did not answer at once; and suddenly she lifted her head, her face all animation.

"Look here, I have a notion—an inspired notion. Why should not you two get Colonel Mayhew's permission to go off on a week's shooting trip beyond Chumba. Ten days if you like. Theo would love it. You would come back to your writing like a giant refreshed. There now, isn't that a plan worth thinking over?"

Moved beyond his wont, Lenox leaned impulsively towards her.

"My dear Mrs Desmond, your kindness overpowers me. But I really can't see that you and your husband are called upon to put yourselves out like that, on my behalf. You are up here to enjoy your short holiday together; and you are rare good companions, as I know. What right have I to monopolise him for ten days, and

leave you alone? Why should you care, after all, if I do go and knock myself to bits in the interior?"

"That question is unworthy of you, and doesn't deserve an answer," she said on a note of gentle reproof. "Mine does. Will you do what I ask?"

"Since you ask it of me—yes. Always supposing that it suits Desmond to go."

"Of course it will suit him. We will settle it when he comes in."

He leaned back in his chair, and sighed.

"You're amazingly good to me, Mrs Desmond; and I'm an ungrateful brute. Will you overlook that, and play me something warranted to soothe jarred nerves, till your husband comes?"

"Of course I will, gladly. Only you mustn't expect real music from a hireling!"

She chose one of Beethoven's most tenderly gracious Allegrettos, and the soul of the hireling responded creditably to the magic of her touch.

But before she had played many bars a clatter of hoofs announced Desmond's return. He flung himself from the saddle, cleared the verandah steps at a bound, and entered the room:—a man of magnetic vitality, with a temperament like a clear flame; a typical officer of that isolated force to whose gallantry and unwearied devotion to duty India owes more than she is apt to acknowledge, or, possibly, to perceive. He nodded a welcome to Lenox, signed to him to remain seated, and going straight to the piano laid a hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Don't stop. Finish your piece," he said, as she smiled up at him; and he did not remove his hand, but remained standing there, in simple satisfaction at having got back to her.

Now and again, at very rare intervals, Nature seems to select a favoured man and woman to uphold the torch of the ideal, lest it be reduced to sparks and smoke, to refute the cynic and the pessimist; to hearten a world nauseated and discouraged by the eternal tragi-comedy of marriage, with the spectacle of a human relationship of unsullied beauty: a relationship that passes, by imperceptible degrees, from the first antiphony of passionate hearts to

a deep deliberate bliss, “durable from the daily dust of life.”

Desmond’s first marriage had brought him no such revelation of the hidden mysteries of union ; no companionship worthy of the name ; and the happiness that comes late, on the heels of conflict and pain, takes a more conscious grip on the heart, is more firmly held to, more jealously guarded, than that which meets us on the threshold, and is accepted as part of the natural order of things. Blest with vivacity, courage, and an ardent zest for Frontier soldiering, Desmond had rarely found life other than very good ; but he had only proven the full measure of its goodness since his marriage with Honor Meredith. And the months brought increasing reliance on her comradeship ; increasing insight into the depths and delicacies of a passion that was almost genius. His need of her was deeper now than it had been two years ago, when he had believed himself at the summit of desire. For a great love is like a great mountain-range. Each height scaled reveals farther heights beyond. Attainment is no part of our programme here ; and there may well be truth in the axiom that “to travel hopefully is better than to arrive.”

But Eldred Lenox, tangled in the twofold cords of temperament and circumstance, was denied even the privilege of travelling hopefully, and at moments like the present he suffered the additional torment of looking into happiness through another man’s eyes. It was futile to reiterate the obvious drawbacks of marriage for an ambitious man, standing on the threshold of a coveted career. These distracting Desmonds cheerfully and unconsciously refuted them all ! But he accepted the thorns of the situation as toll paid for the privilege of an intimacy he would on no account have forgone, and endured them with the grim stoicism that was his.

The Allegretto ended, Honour swung round on her stool, and set forth her Chumba project without reference to Eldred’s threatened departure. Desmond laughingly professed himself ready to obey orders, within reasonable limits ; and it was finally decided that he should write at once to Colonel Mayhew, Resident of the native State in which Dalhousie’s hills are situated, and whose capital

lies in a cup-shaped valley eighteen miles below the English station.

Thereupon Lenox rose to take his leave; but on the threshold he paused, as though an afterthought had occurred to him.

"Next time you happen to go out calling, Mrs Desmond," he said, with studied carelessness, "you might like to look up a Miss Maurice and her brother. They've been here all the winter; and are living on the top of Bakrotas. I met them—some years ago, in Switzerland. Artists, out here for painting purposes—and rather out of the common run. You might find them interesting."

"They sound as if they would be! Thank you for letting me know of their existence. I'll amuse myself by exploiting them while you two are away."

But Lenox had no wish to expatiate upon the subject, and with a muttered disclaimer he was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

"I will but say what mere friends say—
Or only a thought stronger.
I will hold your hand as long as all may—
Or—so very little longer."

—BROWNING.

"No, I don't like her, and I don't believe I ever shall. One cannot deny that she is beautiful, charming, complete; too complete for my taste. *Cela me gène.* I know no other way to express it."

Quita Maurice balanced herself on the railing of her matchbox verandah, and gazed critically at the corner where the last of Honor Desmond's *jhampannis* had not long since disappeared from view. Garth, the inevitable, stood close beside her, faultlessly equipped as always, even to the gold-tipped cigarette, and the violets that blossomed perennially in his coat. He grew them in pots expressly for the purpose; and his bearer set them in a wine-glass on his breakfast-table every morning.

Quita's verdict on her visitor moved him to a smile of half-cynical amusement. He enjoyed her occasional unabashed lapses into the eternal feminine.

"I'm with you there," he answered, heartily. "The worst fault a human being can commit is to be faultless. Poor Mrs Desmond! She will have to subsist without our admiration."

"No need to waste pity on her, *mon ami*. I am convinced that she gets far more admiration than is good for her as it is. She has only been married a little over two years, I believe, and it is safe to presume that her husband idolises her shadow. She is the sort of woman men put on a pedestal, and worship kneeling; and women mostly detest, because, in their secret hearts, they would like to be up there too! Personally I have no use for pedestals. I am content to be *bon camarade*! As for that sublime Desmond woman, I feel morally certain that she never commits an indiscretion, or has a knot in her shoe-lace, or loses her scissors!"

"Are you peculiarly lenient towards those three failings?"

"I am quite culpably lenient towards the whole tribe of human failings. They are the salt of life. I have never really understood that incessant harping on the mystery of pain and sin. The question, Why should they be allowed to exist? seems to me simply fatuous. No world worth living in could have been created without them. They are the backbone of all drama; and I love drama inordinately. They put the iron into men's souls, and the grit into their characters. Think what a nauseating crew of sentimentalists we should be,

'If all had love, as every nest hath eggs,
And every head of maize her feathery cap.'

I, for one, should beg to be excused from spending three-score years and ten on a planet full of sugar-plums and kisses!"

She left her perch on the railings, and stood erect, in an unconscious attitude of defiance; and Garth watched her speculatively through narrowed lids. He was wondering whether Mrs Desmond's remark that she had persuaded

Captain Lenox to go shooting beyond Chumba, instead of deserting Dalhousie for the interior, might not be accountable for this unusual burst of eloquence.

"I had no notion that you went in for studying big questions of that kind," he remarked, with an amused air of interest.

"Studying them! But no! What call is there to study them? I have my ears and eyes, and my priceless intuitions. It is enough. An artist will learn more about life and character with the help of those three, than all the *savants* in creation could imbibe from a hecatomb of books. Michel—where are you? What has been keeping you so quiet since Mrs Desmond's departure?"

Michael, who promptly appeared on the threshold, held up a large drawing-block for his sister's inspection.

"*Voilà donc! Que dis-tu?* Is it not to the life?"

The picture was a rapid, delicate pastel study of Honor Desmond, presenting her, as Michael had said, "to the life." The broad brow, the short straight nose, the strength and tenderness of the mouth and chin, the smile that hovered like a light in her serious eyes: every detail was faultlessly rendered. But Quita's cry of surprise expressed annoyance rather than admiration.

"What possessed you to do *that*?" she asked, sharply. "It is a living likeness—yes. Better send it to her friend, Captain Lenox. He would give you a hundred and fifty rupees for it like a shot."

The instant the words were out she tingled with mortification at having spoken them in Garth's presence. But he assumed a critical interest in the picture, and Michael, in the first flush of achievement, had eyes and thoughts for nothing else.

"A hundred and fifty? *Parbleu, non!*" he answered, hotly. "It is a possession, a triumph. I do not part with it for money. All the while she talked to you, I never took my eyes from her face, and I struck while the iron was hot. *Mon Dieu, mais elle est superbe!* *C'est une déesse véritable!* *Rien non plus!*"

In ecstatic moments Michael deserted English altogether for the natural language of the emotions; and Quita flashed a glance of amusement at Garth.

“The pedestal already, you see!”

But Michael, deaf or unheeding, continued his pæan of praise.

“But the head alone is not enough. *Il faut le tout ensemble.* *Ça sera magnifique.* Now at last I have the centre figure for my great picture—*Mater Triumphans*. In a day or two I call on her. I ask her permission to immortalise her and myself in one achievement. No woman in her senses could refuse so flattering a request; and her lips, her eyes, betray that, goddess or not, she is before all things a woman.”

“But, my good Michel,” Quita interposed, with a deliberate lightness, “ride your enthusiasm on the curb, I beg of you. Isn’t one goddess at a time enough to fill your expansive heart? I warn you that if you are going to disgrace me by ostentatiously falling in love with this Mrs Desmond, I shall give you up for good, and insist on a legal separation! Now, I am tired of idling, and it’s high time I went back to my picture.” She held out a hand to Garth. “*À demain*,” she said, with a gracious smile of dismissal. “But not till tea-time, please. I have a certain amount of work to get through every day if *you have not!*”

Garth’s reply was conveyed in a lingering pressure of her hand. He was a past master in this discreet method of expressing the inexpressible; and he had the satisfaction of seeing the colour deepen in her cheeks, as she released herself hastily, and passed on into the house.

During a long ride homeward, Garth found time for much interested speculation on the possible issue of events. The situation appeared sufficiently incomprehensible to afford scope for dramatic developments; and he shared to the full Quita’s taste for drama, provided always that it did not deprive him of sleep, or render him personally uncomfortable. He shared also her magnanimous attitude towards human shortcomings; frankly acknowledging his own, and skilfully utilising those of other men—and women. But bad men are as often tripped up by the unquenchable spark of good in human nature as good men are by the equally unquenchable spark of evil; and James Garth was not altogether devoid of the little leaven that

leavens the whole lump. There were even moments—and the present was one—when it asserted itself to the detriment of his cool-headed schemes. Generally speaking, a husband in the background in no way disturbed his accommodating code of morals. But scruples, hitherto unknown, seemed set like a hedge of defence about this girl, who was, in every respect, so very much a woman.

For all her love of dangerous ground, her airy scorn of conventions, she had a knack of compelling some measure of uprightness, even from so unpromising a subject as James Garth. Thus, bone-bred gossip though he was, his silence in respect of her astounding revelation was assured. Her words, "I trust you, as a gentleman," had quickened that good grain in him, which is the saving grace of us all. Also the knowledge itself hurt him more than he could have believed. It seriously upset his equanimity for no less than a week; not indeed to the extent of damaging his appetite, or his sleep, but enough to make her society a distraction more bitter than sweet; enough to drive him into dining at the Strawberry Bank Hotel, though the cuisine of that mixed establishment compared very unfavourably with his own.

Here he naturally met Lenox, and the meeting re-awakened his consuming curiosity; awakened also those primitive savage instincts which no surface civilisation will ever annihilate while the world holds one woman and two men. And how should it be accounted theft to rob a man of that which, to all appearance, he neither possessed nor desired to recapture?

In twenty years of philandering he had never experienced so keen a desire for conquest; and if this inexplicable husband chose to leave his wife in an equivocal position, he must be prepared to accept the consequences, which are, in general, the last things that any average man is prepared to accept. Shrewdness and vanity alike convinced Garth that Quita's attitude on Dynkund, viewed in the light of her subsequent disclosure, counted for nothing; while the fact that for six months she had readily accepted his companionship counted for much. Her fine sense of honour had naturally compelled her to "head him off" dangerous ground. But he consoled him-

self with the reflection that a woman's sense of honour is rarely her strongest point. Pit her heart against it, and the outcome is merely a question of time. A conviction founded on his own complicated past!

In his esteem, then, nothing stood between him and his desire but a poor crop of scruples, readily trampled under foot; and by a fine stroke of irony Lenox himself completed the trampling process. He, who rarely took an active part in the random, unedifying talk congenial to after-dinner "pegs" and cigars, had one night been moved to administer advice to a rapturous subaltern, in the shape of a few trenchant cynicisms in respect of women and marriage, bidding him not be fool enough to run his misguided head into the noose; and the subaltern had collapsed like a pricked air-ball. But Garth, to his own surprise, retorted with no little warmth; and Lenox, turning in his chair, looked at him deliberately—a glint of steel in his eyes.

"I couldn't presume to cross swords with you, Major," he remarked, on a quiet note of contempt. "Your experience is as extensive as my own is limited; and you have the good luck to be popular. I have not. But that is simply a question of *métier*. Yours is to flatter women, even behind their backs; whilst I am blockhead enough to speak the truth about them, even to their faces. And the last thing a normal woman wants from any man is—the truth."

From that moment Garth had hardened his heart. And now—a week later—as he rode down from the Crow's Nest, he chuckled to himself over the satisfactory way in which Lenox was playing into his hands by adopting an attitude that would plainly act as a foil to his own deferentially persistent courtship; a metaphorical walking round the walls of Jericho, that must end in capitulation, soon or late.

From his point of view, Quita's unique position of personal freedom, coupled with legal bondage, added a distinct flavour to the whole affair: and so well pleased was he with the aspect of things in general, that, before reaching Potrain, he headed his pony up another corkscrew path, that climbed to another doll's house bungalow. Here he

spent a couple of hours, lounging in the drawing-room of one of the lesser lights in his firmament, flattering her by a delicately conveyed impression that he found her the only woman in the station worth talking to. And so, home to his own well-appointed house, where, two hours after an irreproachable dinner, he slept the sleep of the man whose conscience has been trained not to make inconvenient remarks.

CHAPTER VII.

“God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our lives out.”

—BROWNING.

BEFORE May was out Honor met her unpromising acquaintance several times, by chance. But nothing beyond formal greetings passed between them. Twice she happened to be riding alone with Lenox ; the third time, her husband was with them : and on every occasion Quita's companion was James Garth,—the only one among them all who enjoyed the situation. Quita herself found a perverse satisfaction, unworthy of her best moments, in thus emphasising her indifference to her husband's presence ; ignoring, with characteristic heedlessness, the fact that a two-edged weapon is an ill thing to handle : and Lenox, accepting her unspoken intimation *au pied de la lettre*, steeled himself to half-cynical, half-stoical endurance.

He had returned heartened, and fortified by a week of stirring sport, and by closer contact with a personality wholesome and invigorating as a hill wind ; a sympathy of the practical order, that found expression in matter-of-fact service and good fellowship, rather than in speech. He had given up all thought of leaving the station ; had decided to set his teeth, and go through with his ordeal, sooner than disappoint these new-found friends, who seemed already to have become a part of his life. Such rapid intimacies are a distinctive feature of a country

where a guest may come for a night, and stay for a month ; where all white men are brothers, in the widest sense of the word.

And Eldred Lenox did not hold with half measures. Since he stood his ground in order to please the Desmonds, he held himself ready to fall in with any joint plans they might choose to make. Thus, he agreed to share in their arrangements for the June camp, at Kajiar,—a natural glade hid in the heart of Kalatope Forest: and even accepted, without demur, Colonel Mayhew's proposal to preface the 'week' with a two days' house-party at the Chumba Residency ;—a picturesque house, whose garden of lawns, and roses, and English trees falls sheer to the eddying river below. The two sportsmen had spent a couple of days here on their way back, the Resident being down in Chumba on State business ; and his suggestion had been the natural outcome of Desmond's keen interest in the book which was his hobby of the moment.

"I must be down here then," he explained, "for the *Minjla Mela*, a superstitious ceremony by which we test the luck of the State for the coming year. An unfortunate buffalo is flung into the Ravee, just above the rapids ; and if he succumbs, or scrambles out on the far side, the gods will not fail us. But if he lands on the town bank, they won't trouble their heads about us till next June. Naturally we do our best to prevent such a catastrophe, in spite of our conviction that the matter is settled by the will of the gods ! As far as I know, the ceremony is peculiar to Chumba ; and this would be a good chance for you to see it, if you don't mind a trifle of heat, and if your wife would care to come too, so much the better."

"She'll come like a shot, thanks," Desmond answered heartily.

"Good !—We'll get up a native dinner at the Palace in honour of the occasion. My little girl has set her heart on the plan, rather to my wife's dismay. The Maurices want to come too ; and we may have to include Garth, on her account ; though I confess I wanted her for myself ! She's worth talking to, that girl. There's a touch of genius in her composition, and a touch of the folly that's apt to go along with it ; or she would never give the gossips a

chance to couple her name with Garth's. If he is in earnest, so much the worse for her.—We may count on you, Lenox, I hope?" he added, turning to the impassive man at his side, whom he had unwittingly smitten between the joints of his harness.

Lenox's muttered assent was a trifle indistinct, owing to the thick pipe-stem between his teeth, and rising deliberately, he passed out of the smoking-room into the wistaria-shadowed verandah, where the turbulent voice of the river seemed to echo his own mood. It was well for himself, and for James Garth also, that he ran no risk of meeting the man at that moment.

The thought of that first fortnight in June unnerved him. For Colonel Mayhew's words had done more than turn the knife in an open wound. Lenox was blest, or curst, with that most pitiless of mentors, a Scotch conscience. Whatever Quita's failings, or her attitude to himself, there could be no shelving the fact that he was her husband:—the guardian of her good name, the one man on earth who could claim the right to criticise her conduct. Her probable repudiation both of his criticism, and his right to offer it, did not, in his view, justify him in standing aloof, if need for speech should arise. Possibly passion, smouldering at the heart of duty, urged him towards the desperate experiment. But if so, he would not admit it, even to himself. He merely decided—with an access of fastidious disgust at the whole situation—to accept this fate-sent opportunity for judging how far her behaviour warranted Colonel Mayhew's kindly concern. For he knew enough of Garth and his methods to feel certain that, in his case, to covet an invitation was to procure it.

After all, he reflected bitterly, a closer acquaintance with facts might cure him of an infatuation against which pride and inherited instinct had rebelled in vain: and so intricate are the mazes of self-deception, that he firmly believed in his own desire to be cured.

It was, no doubt, solely in pursuance of this purpose that, a few days later, he added his initials, with a wry face of resignation, to a subscription list, proposing that the bachelors of the station should give a ball on the third

of June. He had not seen the inside of a ballroom for years: but since the season seemed marked for strange experiences, this one might as well be included with the rest. And in the meantime, this inconsistent misogynist slept little, smoked inordinately, and spent the greater part of his leisure at Terah Cottage. Perhaps this also was part of the cure!

Desmond noted the fact, not without an occasional spark of annoyance. For all his magnanimity, the man was masculine to the core; hot-blooded, and still very much a lover at heart. But pride and a boundless trust in the woman he had won had withheld him as yet from serious comment.

Lenox dined with them on the night of the dance; and came armed with programmes, at Honor's request.

"Are you going to give me my share before we start?" he asked, as they shook hands.

"If I do, will you try to dance?"

He laughed abruptly. "Not I. It would be a sight to make angels weep! I shall take you right away from the whole thing, and talk to you—that's all. Is that good enough?"

"Quite good enough!"

He scanned an open programme with perplexed interest, as though it were an Egyptian hieroglyph.

"How long do each of these things last?" he asked, with evident amusement.

"About twelve minutes, with the pause."

"What's the good of twelve minutes? Can't I have them in batches, three at a time. Or would that be going quite out of bounds?"

Honor laughed. . . . "I'm afraid so! Though it would be far nicer. But I will give you one 'batch,' and two isolated ones; and that's a generous allowance, I assure you."

"Thanks.—I suppose Desmond takes you in to supper?"

"Yes. It's a standing engagement! Why don't you ask Miss Maurice?" There was a moment of silence.

"We are not intimate enough for that," he answered, with a bad imitation of unconcern; and Honor wondered,

as she had done before now, wherein lay the key to a curiosity-provoking situation. But just then Desmond joined them; and no more was said.

The moment they entered the ballroom Lenox was aware of his wife,—the focal point in a circle of men, distributing her favours with a smiling impartiality that was, in itself, a delicate form of coquetry, while Garth stood sentinel beside her, with an unmistakable suggestion of 'No Thoroughfare,' which he could assume to a nicety; and which Lenox noted with a curse at the restrictions imposed upon civilised man.

But a second glance at Quita crowded all else out of his mind. It was his first sight of her in full evening dress, and he stood spellbound by the radiant quality of her charm: a charm that triumphed over minor imperfections of feature and form; a mental and spiritual vitality that had deepened rather than diminished with the years. Her dress, like everything about her, was an instinctive expression of herself: though Lenox, while appreciating its harmony, could not have defined it in set terms. He knew that it was of velvet; that it sheathed her rounded slenderness as a rind sheathes its fruit; that the light and shade on its surface, as she moved, reminded him of willows in a wind; that, from shoulder to hem, the eye was nowhere checked, the simplicity of outline nowhere marred by objectless incidents of adornment. He noted also that its indefinite colour was repeated in a row of aquamarines, that glistened like drops of sea-water at her throat.

A light touch on his arm recalled him to outward things.

"Captain Lenox, where are your manners?" Honor Desmond remonstrated, with laughter in her eyes. "The Mayhews have just gone past, and you looked straight through them! Is that the way you welcome your guests?"

He muttered an incoherent apology, and fervently hoped that she had not observed the direction of his gaze. A vain hope, seeing that she was a woman!

"Better get safe into the card-room before I do any-

thing worse!" he added uneasily. "I'll be back for number five. Trust me not to forget."

As he crossed the barn of a room,—lavishly draped with bazaar bunting, and starred with radiating bayonets,—his eyes lighted on Kenneth Malcolm, the Engineer subaltern, whose current of courtship had been checked by Maurice's arrival on the scene:—a boy of stalwart build; his straight features and well-poised head justifying the sobriquet of Apollo, bestowed upon him by an effusive admirer, whose sole reward had been a cordial detestation. He leaned against the wall, absently twirling the cord of his programme; his attention centred on a corner of the room, where Elsie Mayhew—an incarnate moonbeam of a girl—was critically examining the pattern on her fan, while Maurice possessed himself of her programme, and sprinkled it liberally with the letter M. In the boy's bottled-up resentment Lenox saw a reflection of his own; and the fact moved him to scorn rather than sympathy.

"Damned idiots, both of us!" he reflected savagely. "A couple of dogs whose bones have been confiscated, and we haven't even the pluck to snarl."

The opening valse struck up as he reached the card-room. Without looking directly at his wife, he saw Garth's arm encircle her waist, saw him hold her thus, for an appreciable moment, before starting; and sat down to the whist table with murder in his heart.

At number five he re-entered the ballroom to claim Honor Desmond for his 'batch' of dances, and to take her, as he had said, right away from it all. She found him little inclined for talk; yet none the less quick to appreciate her understanding of his mood.

"Thank you for bearing with me," he said, as they parted in one of the many doorways opening on to the long verandah. "I won't come in. I am in the humour for the profound philosophies of tobacco and the stars."

"Better companions than a mere woman!" she answered, smiling into the gravity of his eyes. "Don't deny it. I have no taste for lip service."

"Nor I the smallest gift for it. Still, truth is truth;

and a good deal depends on the quality of—the mere woman."

She vouchsafed him the stateliest shadow of a curtsey.

"I believe I shall end in converting you, after all ! Number twelve. Don't forget."

And turning from him she saw that her husband stood a few paces off, watching them with a thoughtful scrutiny that caught at her heart. Gliding across the polished floor, she slipped a hand under his elbow, and leaned close to him.

"Darling," she whispered, "I am so glad this is ours." Without a word, he put his arm round her, and swept her into the crowd.

For a while Lenox followed them with his eyes, as they circled smoothly in and out among the dancers, as notable a couple as the room contained. Then he raked the shifting crowd for Quita's grey-green figure,—in vain. Neither she nor Garth was to be seen. It needed small perspicacity to locate them: and grinding his teeth Lenox went out again into a night jewelled with the unnumbered bonfires of the universe. Striking a match, he lit his pipe, in defiance of the knowledge that for the past few weeks he had been persistently overstepping his self-imposed allowance, and fell to pacing the railed path outside the building.

Was it altogether his own fault, he wondered bitterly, that he stood thus, cut off from the core of life, breaking his teeth upon the husks of it, and making believe that they satisfied his hunger? In the tragedies resulting from 'the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things,' that question flung, again and again into the 'derisive silence of eternity,' mocks the soul with echo's answer. Where lies the blame? Where, indeed? For all his vaunted supremacy man is not always master of his fate. Circumstance, heredity, the despicable trifle, the inexpert finger, which a certain type of human is so zealous to thrust into an alien life, compass him about with a cloud of witnesses to his own impotence.

With which conclusion, softened by the kindly influence of drugged tobacco, Lenox knocked the ashes out of his pipe; and decided that since he was here to observe

his wife and Garth, and to cure himself of an undignified infatuation, it would be well to return to the ballroom till number twelve.

But as he moved forward a low laugh, near at hand, chained him to the spot. Then Quita emerged from a patch of shadow, closely followed by Garth. She tilted her chin, and flung a smiling threat at him over her shoulder.

"If you can't be more reasonable, I shall cancel your remaining dances and give them to the Riley boy." Which announcement brought him swiftly to her side; and Lenox failed to catch his murmured reply. They passed on without perceiving him; and he followed . . . merely from a sense of duty!

At one of the open doorways, that flung panels of light across the verandah, they paused; and he paused also, a few paces off. The couples within were forming themselves into ordered squares.

"Lancers," she said, in a tone of distaste.

"Are you dancing them?" he asked.

"No."

"Come and sit out again, then; and I'll be as reasonable as you please."

She glanced quickly round the room, as if in search of something.

"Very well," she said: and turning on the threshold, came face to face with her husband.

With a scarcely perceptible start, she acknowledged his grave bow of recognition, and drew back to let him pass. But he remained close enough to catch what followed.

"I'd rather dance than sit out, after all," she announced, with a brisk change of manner.

"But, dear lady, . . . why?"

She laughed. "What a question! I thought you pretended to know something about women? I claim the divine right of whim. *Voilà tout!* One can't spend the evening in explanation. The spirit moves me to romp. It's infinitely more wholesome than mooning under the stars. All we want now is a cheery *vis-à-vis*. Ah . . . there's Michel. The very man!"

She signalled across the room with her fan, and Michael

came skidding and slithering towards her, a delighted girl clinging to his arm:—a girl in the glamour of her first season, a-thrill to her white kid finger-tips because these rested on the sleeve of a living artist, who had already paid her one or two chivalry-coated compliments.

“Now why the deuce did she weather-cock round like that?” Lenox wondered, floundering in the quicksands of masculine ignorance.

But no answer suggested itself; because this woman, who was his, and yet not his,—this woman, with her many-hued personality, rich in subtle contradictions—was a sealed book to him, and seemed like to remain so. And what, after all, are the hearts that beat closest to our own but sealed books, which we open from time to time, at random; too often at the wrong page? But a ballroom is no fit place for abstract meditation. The lust of eye and ear, the pride of life, challenge the sense at every turn, till mere thought seems a mighty bloodless affair.

Lenox moved back to the doorway, leaned against the woodwork, and folding his arms, surveyed the scene before him with the apathetic interest of the large and mystified. The long room was crowded with jumbled atoms of colour, like a damaged kaleidoscope; with talk and laughter; with the whisper of sweeping skirts, and the clink of spurs. Then the first provocative bars set every foot in motion; and the kaleidoscope effect was complete.

Lenox,—towering isolated, amid a world of light-hearted couples,—was aware that beneath his surface indifference there lurked a certain shamefaced envy of these bewildering mortals who could shuffle off the years, and revert, unabashed, to the entrancing follies of childhood; and who could yet, in lucid intervals, grapple undismayed with intricacies of Indian legislation, lead a forlorn hope, love and suffer and die, if need be, with a stiff lip, and an obstinate faith in ‘the ultimate decency of things.’ For of a truth, the earth holds no more fantastic farrago of folly and heroism than your average human being: and musing on these things, Lenox decided that there must have been some radical flaw in his own education.

Not twenty feet away, the General himself—the host-in-chief of the evening—condemned, despite increasing years and girth, to the Eton jacket of boyhood, pranced and glided with elaborate precision, and took every opportunity of twirling plump little Mrs Mayhew almost off her feet. Both laughed inordinately at each repetition of the mild joke: and if the C.B. blazing on the General's mess-jacket, and the little lady's full-grown daughter contrasted oddly with their passing display of childishness, both were serenely blind to the fact.

But among a hundred dancers, not one plunged more whole-heartedly into the folly of the moment than Quita. She had stationed herself opposite the door where Lenox stood, and the very spirit of devilry seemed to have entered into her, driving her to italicise every trait in herself that must needs grate on his fastidiousness where a woman's conduct was concerned. Her effervescent gaiety dominated the 'set,' which speedily degenerated into a romp; till, in the third figure, an incident occurred which partially brought her to her senses.

The room reeled and hummed with spinning circles, like living Katherine-wheels, when Quita,—losing her precarious hold upon her partner's coat-sleeve, and flying outward, by a natural impetus that must have sent her crashing against the woodwork of the door,—found herself caught, and steadied by her husband's hands at her waist. For a lightning instant he held her thus—breathless and throbbing, like a bird imprisoned in his grasp: then he straightened himself, and let fall his empty hands.

"I am sorry," he muttered, barely looking at her. "But I was afraid you might hurt yourself."

"Thank you. It was very stupid of me."

She left him hurriedly, red-hot vexation tingling in her cheeks: and when next the Katherine-wheels spun about, she remained stationary, smiling and waving her hand in answer to repeated invitations to "come on."

Lenox remained stationary also, though the whole scene had suddenly become hateful to him: for that moment of contact, and the rush of colour to his wife's face, had roused him to the need for immediate action. Thus, when a final mad galop scattered the coherent atoms of the kaleido-

scope, he intercepted Quita and her partner, as they hurried out to secure a favourite nook.

But the polite formula of the ballroom did not spring readily to his lips.

"Have you a spare dance to give me?" he asked bluntly. "Since you evidently don't object to sitting out."

His tone had in it more of demand than of request, an effect heightened by his deliberate omission of her name; and against his will annoyance lurked in the last words. But some men have a positive talent for standing in their own light.

For a second or two her eyes challenged his in mute amazement. Each seemed trying to read the other's thought. But pride darkens insight: and at the critical moment a slight movement of the arm she held reminded her of Garth's glimpse behind the scenes. She pulled herself together, and made an obvious feint of consulting her programme.

"If you really wanted one, you should have spoken earlier," she rebuked him lightly. "I'm afraid I haven't so much as half an extra to offer you now."

He accepted his dismissal with a curt bow of acknowledgment.

"Thought I wanted to make love to her, no doubt," he reflected savagely, as he moved away. And she passed on into the verandah, wondering . . . wondering why he had wanted that dance, and whether she would have thrown some one over for him, but for Garth's opportune reminder at her elbow.

On the opening of the next dance, Lenox sought and found Honor Desmond, silently offered his arm, and led her through the verandah out into the starshine,—which is a reality in India, on moonless nights.

"What a thundering relief it is to get away from it all!" he said at length. "Would it bother you to stroll a little way up the hill? We shall be crowded out here, in no time; and I must have another pipe."

"Let's stroll then, by all means. I should enjoy it; and you know how I love tobacco. I saw you looking on at that dance; and I rather envied you. I often wish I could set aside a few dances just for looking on, without having

to make talk for any one. People interest me so passionately ; always have done, since I can remember."

"Even Button Quails, and black-hearted woman-haters?"

"Yes. Especially the woman-haters ; because they need converting!"

"And are unconvertible," Lenox declared with a laugh. "But don't you ever get sickened with the deadly sameness of the whole tribe of us,—grinding ourselves to dust in the eternal treadmill of hatred and love, hope and despair? Every conceivable human complication has been repeated *ad nauseam* since Adam made a fool of himself in the garden of Eden."

"And through all that endless sameness, no two men and women have ever behaved twice alike! That's where the interest comes in, don't you see? To-night, for instance, Miss Maurice and that pretty child Elsie Mayhew are both wasting their sweetness on men quite unworthy of them ; but each is doing the same thing in a fashion so entirely her own, that it is not like looking on at the same play at all. I am specially concerned over the Mayhew muddle, for I believe that handsome Engineer boy is capable of breaking his heart in earnest because Elsie has lost hers *pro tem.*,—engaging little goose that she is. Really I sometimes think that the man and woman puzzle is just an endless game of cross questions and crooked answers!"

Lenox laughed again, harshly.

"That's a straight shot!" he said. "It's a mad world ; and the maddest creature in it is the man who stakes his happiness on the state of a woman's heart."

Honor slipped her hand from his arm.

"Really, Captain Lenox," she protested, half-laughing, half in earnest, "that remark almost amounts to an insult! What do you suppose Theo would say if he heard you?"

"Wouldn't stop to pick his language," Lenox answered with a twisted smile. "But his testimony counts for nothing. He has found the one woman among a thousand, that even Solomon failed to find ; and the Lord knows *he* didn't judge them from hearsay!"

The sincerity underlying his bluntness brought the

blood to Honor's cheeks. "Theo has simply found—a woman who loves him," she answered softly. "A discovery most men can make if they choose; even rank heretics like you! Will you forgive me, I wonder, if I say that I believe the thing you really need, though you may not guess it, is . . . a woman in your life?"

Lenox did not answer: and they walked on for a time in silence.

"Have I vexed you?" Honor asked at length.

"No. You touched an exposed nerve. That was all. And I should like you to know the truth now; or at least part of it.—Five years ago I did take . . . a woman into my life, as you put it; and I have never known real peace or comfort since."

Honor started, and turned upon him a face of incredulity.

"Captain Lenox! Do you mean—have you actually—been married?"

"I actually am married, in the eyes of the law, at least. What's more, my wife is here, in Dalhousie, in that cursed ballroom,—with neither my name nor my ring to protect her—playing the fool for the amusement or perdition of another chap. You spoke of her a minute ago. I need hardly say more, need I?"

"No, no. I understand it all now," she murmured, deeply moved. "Then that was why you wanted to go away last month?"

"Yes."

"And I stupidly made things harder, in my blind zeal to help you?"

"No, indeed. You simply convinced me, without suspecting it, that it would be cowardly to bolt at sight. Besides, it would have amounted to an open confession that—one cared."

"And don't you—care?"

Lenox clenched his teeth upon an inarticulate sound; and his amber mouthpiece snapped like a stick of sealing-wax. He took the pipe from his mouth; eyed it ruefully, and slipped it into his breast-pocket.

"A good friend gone," he muttered. "And all on account of a woman who doesn't care a snap of the fingers whether one is alive or dead."

"In my opinion that remains to be proved."

"Does it? Isn't her conduct with that confounded ladykiller proof enough to convince you?"

"No."

"Well, then, look here. Ten minutes ago I went so far as to ask her for a dance. She gave me the snub direct: and she'll not get a chance to refuse another request of mine—that's certain."

Honor's lips lifted at the corners.

"I wonder what tone of voice you asked her in?" was all she said.

"Quite the wrong one, no doubt. I was in no humour for going on my knees. But she knew right enough that I wouldn't have risked refusal, unless I was very keen on the dance."

"All the same, you *will* give her another chance. You must. No act of folly on her part can make it right for you to leave her in such a false position."

"The position was her own choice,—not mine."

"One could guess as much. Yet the fact remains that she is—yours, to make or mar: and it seems to me no less than your duty to pocket your pride, and save her from her own foolishness in spite of herself."

Lenox drew an audible breath, like a man in pain.

"You do know how to hit between the eyes," he said very low. "But—I have suffered enough at her hands."

"And has she suffered nothing—at yours?"

Honor's voice was scarcely louder than his own, and her pulses throbbed at her own daring. Lenox stood stock-still, and looked at her.

"Upon . . . my . . . soul," he said slowly, "you are a stunning woman! I . . ."

"Please don't think I meant you to answer such a question," she broke in hurriedly, with flaming cheeks.

"Of course not. You meant it as a reminder that there are two sides to every question."

"Yes. How nice of you to understand! I have no shadow of right to take you to task. But when the fate of two lives seems hanging on a thread, one dare not keep silence.—Now, I think we ought to turn back. And I wonder if you would mind telling me a little about . . .

your wife," she added, with diplomatic intent to prolong his softened mood. "She is so charming; so individual. But I haven't been able to get at her at all. She seems almost to dislike me; and I am just beginning to guess why."

"Nonsense . . . nonsense," he protested brusquely. "You are entirely mistaken."

"That also remains to be proved!"

They retraced their steps down the rough path that descends from the Mall to the Assembly Rooms, walking very slowly, as people do when absorbed. Honor, with all a woman's skill, imparted a flavour of reminiscence to their talk; and no man with a spark of love in his heart can hold out, for long, against the magic suggestiveness of memory. For all his guarded indifference of manner, she felt the ice melting under her touch: and the passionate human interest, of which she had already spoken, held her, to exclusion of such minor trivialities as possibly distracted partners. For this woman, the human note,—be it never so untuneful—surpassed the sublimest music plucked from the heart of wood or wire.

Arrived on the gravel ledge outside the building, they paused in a shaft of light, still intent on their subject; till the inspiriting rhythm of a polka shattered the stillness; and Honor, turning hastily, caught sight of an erect figure in the doorway behind her.

"There's Theo. He seems to be looking for me," she said. "Why, we must have talked through two dances. Come."

But at the foot of the verandah steps Lenox held out his hand.

"The evening is ended for me. I am going straight home, to think over all you have said. I'll be round by ten to-morrow. Good-night—and thank you."

He italicised the last words by a vigorous hand-clasp; and a moment later she stood in the doorway, confronting her husband. A glance at his face put her laughing apology to flight.

"I tell you what it is, Honor," he broke out hotly, "you're going too far altogether. Here has Maurice been letting half Dalhousie know that he couldn't find you

anywhere ; and the last dance — was mine. Heaven knows where you buried yourselves. I didn't attempt to look. Lenox has no business to monopolise you in this way. Woman-hater, indeed ! ”

“ It was not *his* fault,” she flashed out, in an impulse more generous than wise : but her blood was as quick to take fire as his own.

“ Then it was yours, which is fifty times worse.”

Honor lifted her head with a superb dignity of gesture.

“ As you please,” she said quietly. “ It is useless to attempt explanation here, or anywhere, till you are more . . . like yourself.”

Returning couples were by now besieging the doorway ; and she passed on into the ballroom, her head still high, her lips compressed, lest others should note their tendency to quiver. A woman who loves the man of her choice with every fibre of her being does not readily forget, though she may forgive, his first rough words to her.

Honor was claimed at once by Kenneth Malcolm, a favourite partner, boy though he was. But the keen edge of her interest was blunted. She wanted one thing only : to be alone with Theo ; to set his mind at rest : and those ‘separated selves,’ who drew her like nothing else on earth, became of a sudden mere voluble obstructions between herself and her desire.

Half an hour later she came up to him, where he stood, laughing and talking in a group of men.

“ I am tired, Theo,” she said in a low tone. “ Mr Maurice is getting my dandy for me. But don't come away if you'd rather stop on.”

Their eyes locked for an instant.

“ Is that likely ? ” he asked, a gleam in his own.

“ I don't know.”

“ You do know. Look sharp and get your things on.”

Michael Maurice did not hurry himself over the congenial task of settling his *déesse véritable* among the cushions of her dandy,—a hybrid conveyance, half canoe, half cane lounge, slung from the shoulders of four men, by an ingenious arrangement of straps and cross poles. Closer acquaintance had deepened his admiration : but a

nameless something in her manner warned him that it must not be expressed in his usual promiscuous fashion. She had refused, very sweetly but decisively, the honour of appearing in his great picture. But Desmond had succumbed to the temptation of procuring a portrait of her and 'little Paul.' "At the worst, I can sell a pony to pay for it," he had said, in answer to her remonstrance. "And I shall think it cheap at the price!"

And now, as the dandy-bearers turned to mount the ascent, he came to his wife's side. She had drawn off her gloves, and one hand rested on the woodwork of her canoe. He covered it with his own, walking by her thus, for a few steps, in silence: and it was enough.

"Mount now," she commanded him softly. "And let's hurry home. I've ever so much to tell you."

He obeyed: and they journeyed upward to familiar music of hoof-beats, and the murmur of *jhampannies*, wrapt about by the magic of a night so still that all the winds seemed to have gone round with the sun to the other side of the world.

A tray set with glass and silver awaited them in the drawing-room.

Honor, entering first, slipped the long cloak from her shoulders with a satisfied sigh, a sense of passing from the unreal to the real, which she often experienced on returning from a dance: and underlying all, a profound pity for the lone and ill-mated women, in a world of oddments and misfits, who have never felt the thrill of such home-comings as this of hers to-night. Then she swept round, and fronted her husband:—a gleaming figure, like a statue cut in ivory; no colour anywhere, save the living tints of her face and eyes and hair.

"Well?" she laughed, on a low clear note of happiness. "I hope you are properly ashamed of yourself!"

But before the words were out, he had her in his arms; and for a supreme moment the great illusion was theirs that they were not two, but one, as the Book decrees.

Then she pushed him gently into a chair, and kneeling beside him drew his arm around her, resting her head against his in a fashion inexpressibly tender. The natural dignity that was hers set a high value on such sweet

familiarities : and if Desmond submitted to them in silence, it was because the man in him was too deeply moved for speech.

Then she told him, at some length, all that she had gleaned of the past and present relations between Lenox and his wife.

“Now, do you see how I came to lose sight of everything for the time being ?” she concluded, smiling up at him. “So far as I can gather, things seem to be at a deadlock, unless one can persuade him to take the first step forward.”

“And you want to play Providence, as usual ? Is that it ?”

“Don’t laugh at me, Theo ! I am in earnest. I would gladly move heaven and earth to put things straight between them.”

“But this seems a case of moving a Scot. A far tougher job, I can tell you !”

“Well, I think I moved him a little to-night ; and he is coming round to-morrow for a ride.” Desmond frowned ; and she made haste to add : “Now that is just where I must have your co-operation, Theo, or I can do nothing. I want you to trust me, and give me a free hand for these next few weeks. Will you, . . . please ?”

“Does that mean I am to let you be about with Lenox as much as you choose ?”

“Probably not more than I have been so far. I only want to be sure that whatever I do you won’t speak to me again as you did to-night.”

She felt the muscles of his arm tighten.

“I think you may feel sure of that much,” he said. “But you are asking a very hard thing of me, Honor. Lenox is a thorough good chap ; and I don’t want to be driven into disliking him. It isn’t as if I were a saint, like Paul. I’m just a man, and a grasping one at that ! What’s more, I am very jealous for you ; and I have the right to be. Society doesn’t recognise philanthropic motives. It takes you and your acts at their face value . . .”

“I know, I know,”—she straightened herself impulsively ; her hands clasped ; her bare arms laid across his

knees. "And I'll be ever so circumspect, dearest, I promise you. But oh, Theo, . . . don't you understand? It is just because we are so blessedly happy, you and I, that the thought of what those two foolish people are missing troubles me so sorely."

Such an appeal was irresistible. They had lived deeply enough, these two, to know the real importance of happiness.

"Bless your big heart," he answered warmly. "I understand right enough. By all means help 'em if you can. I'll not baulk you. But it's a delicate task; and I don't quite see how you are going to set about it."

"Nor do I,—yet. One can only trust to intuition, and the inspiration of the moment. From the little he said, it seems that the first move ought to come from her: and possibly my intimacy with him may help to bring her to her senses. Everything depends, of course, on how much she cares. That's still an unknown quantity. But she dislikes me already; which is a promising sign!—Now I am going to fill your pipe, and pour you out a peg; and we'll enjoy ourselves till it's time for second supper!"

It is just such quiet hours of heart-to-heart intimacy that constitute true marriage. For in these uneventful moments links are forged and soldered strong enough to resist the buffeting of storms, or the deadlier, corrosive influence of those minor miseries which poison the very core of life.

A handful of stars—visible through the open glass door into the verandah—had begun to pale, when Desmond lifted his wife to her feet, and blew out the lamp. In the profound stillness their footsteps and low laughter sounded up the wooden stairs. Then a door shut somewhere in the house, and the night absorbed them into herself.

CHAPTER VIII.

“Ce n'est pas le mort qui separe le plus les individus.”
—DE COULEVAIN.

AND what of Lenox, after Honor Desmond's sympathetic exertions on his behalf?

He went straight from her side to the cloak-room; and thence slowly back to his unhomelike rooms at the hotel; a dark solitary figure, with bent head, and a heart full of tumultuous hopes and fears. The events of the evening had stirred him as he had not been stirred since those early days of torment, of undignified oscillation between yearning and despair: and now, at last, love unsteadied for the first time the foundations of his pride; brought home to him the cardinal truth that all the beauty and terror of life spring from the inexorable law of duality that links man and woman, act and consequence, with the same passionless unconcern.

All the way up the hill, this man—who loved night and her manifestations as most men love the morning—had no thought to spare for the splendour of the heavens or the shrouded majesty of earth, so absorbed was he in framing and rejecting possible letters to his wife, who, for all he knew, had already half-lost her heart to another man.

The small sitting-room where Brutus, the faithful, awaited his coming, was more or less a replica of his larger one at Dera Ishmael: the chronically disordered table, books, pipes, sketches, his inseparable friends, the bull-terrier, and the brown tobacco-jar. All these, the familiars of his lonely hours, gave him silent greeting as he crossed the threshold. But for once his spirit failed to respond. The witchery of his wife's lips and eyes; the distracting music of her laughter; that one poignant moment of contact with her living, palpitating self, and Honor Desmond's belief in an undreamed-of possibility, had kindled the man's repressed passion as a lighted match kindles dry powder; had revived in him the common human need, which neither ambition nor work, however absorbing, has yet been known to satisfy.

"My God," he thought. "If I believed I had a ghost of a chance to get hold of her again, I'd go back to that infernal ballroom this minute!"

He turned, as if to carry out his resolve: but at the last, shut down the flood-gates of emotion, fell back on years of self-discipline, and told his heart he was a fool. He had yet to learn that there is a folly worth more than all the wisdom of philosophers, the folly of a man who loves a woman better than his own soul.

Going over to the table, he turned up the lamp, acknowledged the ponderous jubilations of Brutus, and took the damaged pipe out of his pocket. Then he stood looking at it thoughtfully, as it lay in the palm of his hand; an eloquent testimony to that which had been starved, denied, trampled upon for years,—with this result! Smiling half-scornfully at his new-found sentimentalism, he put the pieces into an empty cigarette tin, and thrust it into the top drawer of his table. As he did so, a strange thought invaded his mind. Some day, perhaps, he would show it to her; and how delightfully she would laugh at him for his pardonable foolishness!

But in the meantime the wooing and winning of her still remained to be achieved; a unique position for a husband!

Absorbed in thoughts evoked by the bare possibility of success, Lenox mechanically drew out his empty tobacco-pouch, opened the jar, and thrust a hand into its capacious depths.

Then he started; and two lines of vexation furrowed his forehead. For his fingers, descending in search of the good brown leaf, that was more to him than meat and drink, encountered only a chill hardness,—the bottom of the jar.

He had not emptied it when filling his pouch that morning; and being much preoccupied had not even noticed how little was left. Evidently, during his absence, a hotel servant had helped himself to the remaining handful, and a clear ten days must elapse before the arrival of a fresh consignment from home.

He gathered up the remaining scraps, and gazed at them blankly. His consignments were carefully timed

to overlap one another. By rights the jar should have contained quite a fortnight's supply of his elixir vitæ: and it took him one or two seconds to grasp the full significance of that which had befallen him.

"Great Heaven! I must have been overdoing it like blazes this last month," he reflected grimly. "And how about the next ten days?"

He stood aghast before that simple question, and its obvious answer. It was as if the earth had opened under his feet; as if he had suddenly discovered that only a thin crust intervened between himself and the crater of a volcano. And he had travelled hitherward blindly; goaded by the threefold necessity to work, and sleep, and forget. Thus, stealthily, inexorably, a habit creeps upon a man; enclosing him mesh by mesh in a network imponderable as spun silk, tenacious as steel wire. A sudden movement, a break in the hypnotic influence of routine, and he wakes to find himself prisoned in a web of his own weaving.

Lenox pushed aside the jar impatiently, as though it were in some way to blame; and sank into his chair, head bent, legs outstretched; the picture of defeat. All his thoughts and hopes crashed about him in ruins: and Lenox, contemplating the fragments with a numb acquiescence far removed from resignation, saw only the old maddening irony at work; saw himself, standing yet again, on the threshold of an Eden locked and barred against him; felt in every nerve the grip of the pitiless fact, and asked himself fiercely: "What next?"

Gradually thought penetrated the dull ache of rebellion; and Memory, that capricious handmaid of the brain, unearthed from the rubbish-heap of things forgotten, an incident of early days.

He recalled how, on a certain night, after the confiscation of their candles, and a stern injunction from old Ailie to speak "nae word" till morning, his elder brother—greatly daring—had invaded his bed, and with lips set close to his ear had startled and thrilled him with the following announcement:—

"Listen, Eldred,—what do you think? I've found out at last why Uncle Jock won't tell about grandfather, and

why there's an empty place in the big album where he ought to be. Ailie told me. I bothered her, and bothered her, till she said I should hear it for a warning; and I think you ought to hear it for a warning too. She says grandfather served the East India Company for forty years. He was a grand soldier, and a sportsman; a great tall man, like you will be. Ailie says you 'have his face.' But he went to hell"—this in an awestruck whisper—"through eating too much opium, like some of the natives do out there. I wonder if it's nice stuff to eat; don't you?"

To the boy of ten, listening with rapt interest, his grandfather's backslicing had sounded only a few degrees more heinous than gormandising at Christmas; and since Ailie had proved obdurate when pressed, and even bribed for further information, the spark of curiosity had died out for lack of fuel. But to the man of five-and-thirty, racked with reawakened passion, and with a restless irritability, whose significance could no longer be ignored, the memory of his brother's whispered revelation flashed like a lightning-streak across his present dilemma; leaving him in the grasp of those invisible forces that are the true masters of destiny; that must either break or be broken by man's individual spirit and will. For some of us the struggle is conscious; for some unconscious; for others it never arises at all: because only the touchstone of circumstance can evoke any one of those past lives whereof each single life is so mysteriously compact.

For Eldred Lenox, imbued with his uncle's iron creed, the fight would, of necessity, be conscious and unremitting. But he had no heart to begin it yet. He felt as a man may feel who is suddenly struck blind. Thought, movement, life itself, seemed paralysed by a fear unnameable, and new; the fear of that other self, who is the arch-enemy of us all.

One certainty alone stood out, like a black headland from a sea of mist; all immediate hope of ratifying his marriage was at an end. There spoke his tyrannical conscience with disconcerting directness: and Lenox had never acquired the art of disguising plain fact in a garment of high-sounding words. He told himself straightly

that no right-minded man could deliberately risk handing down to others such a heritage of struggle and possible failure as was his. Yet, in the same breath, the Devil whispered a plausible reminder that men as good as he had taken the risk time after time; that De Quincey himself had followed passion's dictates seemingly without a twinge of self-reproach. But Lenox was too single-minded to take shelter behind the failures of others. For him the principle was all. For him all thought of marriage must be set aside, at least, until he knew for certain how completely the subtle poison had entered into his blood.

"Thank God she didn't give me the chance I wanted!" he breathed in all sincerity: and flinging himself back in his chair, he lay open-eyed and still, while night slipped silently on toward morning.

Brutus made one or two attempts to attract his master's attention by means of a moist nose and an urgent paw; and failing, returned philosophically to the hearth-rug.

The lamp burned low, and lower, till the room reeked with fumes of kerosene. This minor discomfort roused Lenox. He lit two candles, blew out the lamp, and throwing aside his mess jacket, yawned and stretched himself extensively. By this time one craving outweighed all others. Every nerve in him ached for the respite of sleep; and his one chance lay in succumbing to mental or physical exhaustion.

He sat down to the table, and took up his pen, determined to write till it dropped from his fingers. But here also defeat confronted him. For although his subconscious brain was uncomfortably alert and voluble, ordered consecutive thought refused to come at his bidding.

He gave it up at length for the simpler expedient of pacing to and fro in the measured mechanical fashion most conducive to weariness of mind and body. But though weariness came in due course, and the weight of all time hung heavy on his eyelids, sleep held pitilessly aloof from his brain.

For the greater part of two hours the man held out. Then his face hardened; and he turned deliberately to a combined book-shelf and cupboard that hung on the wall.

From the cupboard he took a dark slender bottle labelled chlorodyne; and seating it on the table, fetched a glass and water-bottle from the bedroom.

That done, he poured himself out a dose far exceeding the normal allowance, and diluted it with the least admissible amount of water.

He drank the mixture slowly, savouring its sweetness and warmth; its uncanny power to soothe and bless. But as he set down the glass revulsion took hold of him; and on the heels of revulsion came self-scorn. This last roused him like the prick of a spur: for to men of Eldred Lenox's calibre, self-respect is the oxygen of the soul. The spirit of his grandfather had "scored a point" to-night. But such an achievement must not be risked again.

With the same deliberation that had marked all his former movements, Lenox picked up the bottle, emptied its sluggish contents down one of those primitive sluices that are to be found in every Indian bungalow, and returned, still absently holding it between his finger and thumb. A confession of weakness: there is no denying it. But let him who has not yet found the devil's chink in his own defences cast the stone. Head, heart, or heel—there is a weak spot in the strongest. Not even Achilles' self was plunged wholesale into the waters of immunity.

Quite suddenly Lenox realised that he was still holding the bottle: and for some unfathomable reason the trivial detail acted as a fuse that fires the magazine. For the first time that night, unreasoning anger mastered him: anger against himself; against the whole tragi-comical scheme of things; against the man whose dead sins he was called upon to expiate in his own living flesh.

A curse forced its way between his teeth; and he flung the unoffending scrap of glass into the open hearth, where it clinked and shivered into a hundred splinters, filling the room with the strong sickly odour of the drug.

Then he went back again to the long chair; limbs and brain weighted with a luxury of weariness. Shattered hope; a life-and-death struggle ahead:—the words held no meaning for him now. His lids fell. The balm of Nirvana shrouded his senses, blotting out thought, as sea mists, rolling landward, obliterate all things.

The June morning broke in one sheet of gold. Creeping in through the interstices of lowered "chicks," it emphasised the untidy, up-all-night aspect of the room; the sharp lines, pencilled by pain and struggle, on the sleeper's face, where he lay full length, in shirt-sleeves and scarlet waistcoat, unhooked and flung open before weariness over-powered him.

A deep sound, persistently repeated, at last invaded and dispelled the drugged torpor of his brain: the voice of Zyarulla murmuring: "Sahib—Sahib," with the regularity of a minute-gun.

Lenox stirred, yawned, and looked blankly about him, as though he had waked in another world. Then remembrance sprang at him, like a wild thing upon its prey: and his eyes fell again heavily. In that first moment of consciousness he understood why men of proven honour and courage have been known to take liberties with the laws of life and death.

Zyarulla, entering soundlessly, set down the *chota hazri* on a small table at his master's elbow without betraying his surprise and concern by so much as the flicker of an eyelash. For not even your immaculate family butler can excel, in dignity and true reserve, a bearer of the old school, whose Sahib stands only second to his God, and who would almost as soon think of defiling his caste as of entering another man's service. We have educated the grand old ideal of service out of our own land; and we are fast educating it out of India also: though it remains an open question whether the good wrought by over-civilisation can honestly be said to counterbalance the evil. A question few Anglo-Indians will be found to answer in the affirmative.

Lenox poured out his tea, and drank it thirstily. But the first mouthful of toast was enough for him. He pushed the plate away; and his hand went out instinctively to the pipe Zyarulla had laid beside it.

"Damn!" he muttered between his teeth, almost flinging it from him; and at that instant the door opened.

"*Desmin Sahib argya*,"¹ the Pathan announced; and

¹ Has come.

with a startled sound, Lenox got upon his feet, and began fastening his waistcoat.

"Good morning," he said quietly. "Made a night of it, as you see; and overslept myself."

But beneath his quiet he was acutely aware of the contrast between his own dishevelled aspect, and Desmond's unobtrusive neatness and freshness.

"Hope I don't intrude," the latter apologised, smiling: but his keen eyes searched the other's face, and read tragedy there. "As you hadn't turned up by ten-thirty, my wife was afraid something might have gone wrong. So I came over to set her mind at rest!"

"Your wife? Why, of course! And I promised to be round by ten—ill-mannered cur that I am!" He sank wearily into his chair. "Truth is," he added in a changed tone, "I couldn't get a wink of sleep till near dawn; and then it came down on me like a sledge-hammer. You know the sort of thing."

Desmond nodded, and took a seat on the edge of the table.

"Are you often given that way?" he asked with seeming unconcern.

"Now and again."

"Ever been really bad with it?"

"Pretty bad. Why d'you ask?"

"Because from the looks of you, I should say it was wearing your nerves to fiddle-strings. Ever take anything for it?"

Lenox frowned; and Desmond made haste to add: "No call, of course, to answer a question of that sort. But you look downright ill; and it's unwise to let that kind of thing become a habit."

"Damned unwise!" Lenox answered, with a smile that did not lift the shadow from his eyes. "As I know to my cost. The thing has been a habit with me for longer than I care to reckon."

Desmond raised his eyebrows. He had noticed the fragments in the fender: the faint suggestion of chlorodyne that still clung in the air.

"My dear Lenox, I am sorry for that. And—the remedy? You must have tried something before now?"

"Yes. Drugged tobacco:—opium, a good strong mixture," the other answered bluntly. "You may as well have it straight. You're an understanding fellow; and no Pharisee."

Then, in a few clipped sentences, he stated the bald facts of the case, culminating in his discovery of the previous night. He leaned forward in speaking; elbows on knees; eyes averted from the other's face.

"You see, it's in the blood,—that's the hell of it all," he concluded fiercely. "This morning, when I'd had my fill of thinking things out, I took a stiff dose of chlorodyne. Smashed the bottle afterwards, in disgust. But where's the use? The dice are loaded: and no doubt one will be driven back to it again, sooner or later."

Words and tone betrayed the dread note of fatalism—the moral microbe of the East. But men of Theo Desmond's calibre rarely succumb to its paralysing influence.

"Look here, Lenox,"—he spoke almost brusquely,— "you must get quit of that notion. No man worth his salt goes to meet failure half-way. I grant you're on the edge of an ugly pit, and if you insist on peering into it, your chance is gone. All you have to do is to shut your eyes, and hang to the reins like the very deuce; if it's only for the sake of—your wife. Honor told me about her," he added, with more gentleness.

But Lenox threw up his head impatiently. "My wife?" he repeated on a note of concentrated bitterness. "The greatest kindness I could do her would be to plunge wholesale into the pit, and give her back the freedom she wants. A man with a taint in his blood has no business to beget children foredoomed to fight—and lose."

"My good chap," Desmond broke in hotly. "I'll never believe that any living soul is foredoomed to lose. The chance of a fight, no matter how heavy the odds, includes the chance of victory. And even if things do look a bit hopeless for a time, our orders are plain and straight: 'No surrender.'"

Lenox searched his face.

"Ever been through the fire yourself?"

Desmond nodded.

"I suppose most of us have to go through hell once or

twice," he said quietly. "And I know how it feels to wish that some one would lock up my revolver."

For answer Lenox got up and paced the room, head down; hands plunged deep into trouser-pockets; lost, by now, to all sense of his incongruous appearance.

The other watched him thoughtfully. Then his hand went to his breast-pocket, and drew out a leather case. A man proffers tobacco to a friend in trouble as instinctively as a woman proffers a caress.

"Have a cheroot?" he said, holding them out: and Lenox checked his pacing.

"Thanks,—no. I've no taste for 'em. Never had."

"Better cultivate it, then. These are A1 Havannahs. A passing extravagance. Good to begin upon. I'd drop pipes for a time, if I were you. When it comes to breaking a habit, association is the devil. And whatever happens, don't let this heredity bogey get the upper hand of you. The taint you speak of is no more, as yet, than inherited tendency: and this accident—if you believe in accident, I don't—gives you the chance of killing the snake in the egg. Now light up, there's a good chap; just to keep me company."

Lenox helped himself with a wry face; lit the cigar, and continued his walk. The iron had bitten into his soul: and, at the moment, he was incapable of gratitude. Bit by bit brain and body were adjusting themselves to the new outlook, the new demands enforced upon them; and the process was not a pleasant one.

Suddenly he drew up, and faced his companion.

"You can leave me out of the reckoning now for Chumba and Kajiar," he said abruptly. "I'm in no mood for that sort of foolery. I'll stay here and grind at this book of mine instead. You must excuse me to Mrs Desmond; and tell her just as much of the truth as you think fit."

But before he had finished speaking, Desmond was on his feet, decision in every line of him.

"Not if I know it, my dear fellow! You won't get a stroke of work done just at present; and 'that sort of foolery,' as you call it, will do you all the good in the world. Your best chance is to get right outside yourself;

and we'll make it our business to keep you there—Honor and I."

At that Lenox turned hastily away; and his broken attempt at a laugh was not good to hear.

"Damn it all, man, why don't you leave me alone, to go to the devil in my own way? What can it matter to you, or to any one, whether I break myself in pieces, or am merely broken on the wheel?"

Desmond's quick ear detected emotion beneath the ungraciousness of speech and tone; and following him, he laid a hand on his shoulder, a friendly liberty to which Lenox was little accustomed.

"Come along home with me," he said quietly. "Stay for tiffin, and talk it all out with my wife. She'll be able to answer you far better than I can. Nothing like a woman's sympathy to put a dash of conceit back into a man. Will you follow on? Or shall I wait while you change?"

For an instant Lenox stood silent; then, greatly to his own surprise, he held out his hand.

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," was all he said.

An hour later, Desmond rode away from Terah Cottage, leaving Lenox and his wife alone together. He had promised to give her what help he could in the delicate task she had set her heart upon: and he belonged to the satisfactory type of man who may be counted upon for good measure, pressed down, and running over.

BOOK II.—JUST IMPEDIMENT.

CHAPTER IX.

“So many men ; so many loves.”

—M. G. WILLCOCKS.

A DINNER of native dishes served on leaves—to each guest his own portion on his own leaf—eaten picnic-fashion on a Kashmir carpet in the presence of twelve regally reproachful chairs, is a form of entertainment only to be met with in India ; and when, to these incongruities, is added the crowning one that the host may not defile himself by sharing the meal with his guests, you have a situation typical of the land where all things are possible.

Prompted by Colonel Mayhew, the Chumba Rajah, a shy taciturn boy of sixteen, had despatched a formal invitation, hoping that the Residency party would honour him with their company at the Palace on the evening of their arrival from Dalhousie ; though in truth he wished them anywhere else in the world ; and Colonel Mayhew, who was by no means too old to enjoy a spasmodic daylight flirtation with a woman of Quita’s intelligence, had devised the native menu mainly for her delectation.

A large sheet, promoted to the rank of tablecloth, covered the carpet, while ten cushions apologised for the absence of chairs. A bowl of roses, rigidly arranged in alternate lines of flower and fern, filled the room with fragrance. In front of each guest a snowy dome of rice, ringed about with a strange assortment of curries, gleamed on a silver salver. A quaint array of flat baskets held fragments of roast chicken and kid ; unleavened cakes of

a peculiarly greasy nature did duty for bread ; and the only concessions to civilisation were knives and forks, table-napkins, and champagne.

“ Why shouldn’t we have the courage of our barbarism, and do without knives and forks as well ? ” Quita had suggested airily, at the outset ; and a faint look of horror convulsed Mrs Mayhew’s bird-like face.

Her husband saw it, and came promptly to her aid.

“ No forks, no champagne ! ” he retorted, laughing ; and Quita picked up her fork straightway.

“ Hobson’s choice ! ” she said, in a tone of mock resignation. “ It would be sheer brutality to deprive six men of champagne ! ”

She was sitting now on a cushion, at the Resident’s right hand, feet tucked away under her skirts, and a napkin laid across her knee. On this she had set a leaf piled with saffron-tinted rice, which she was exploring eagerly for incidental sultanas and yellow lumps of sugar, exchanging bulletins, from time to time, with Desmond, who had taken her in to dinner, and in whom she speedily recognised a morning quality of mind that matched her own.

Lenox, sitting opposite between Honor and Elsie, acutely aware that his legs were too long for the occasion, almost forgot the torment of the past week in looking and listening, and wondering how he had ever attained even a passing hold upon a spirit so lightly poised, so compact of volatile essences, that he shrank, almost with awe, from the bare thought of subjecting her uncaptured loveliness to the pains and penalties of marriage. He sat for the most part in silence ; content to let the ripple of her voice and laughter play over him like water over parched earth. Her voice had drawn him irresistibly from the first. It was a thing of exquisite modulations. It thrilled like a caress. Its clear, cool tones, pure from passion, intoxicated him like the rarefied atmosphere of the heights. Once or twice she flung him a question or a remark, as if compelling him to be aware of her existence. He answered her with grave politeness, and an occasional direct look, before which her eyes fell, as if dazzled by a helio-flash from the man’s inner fire.

All these things Honor Desmond noted ; and, by the searchlight of her womanhood, discerned more than Quita herself had yet realised.

Garth, from his uncoveted post of honour at Mrs Mayhew's left hand, noted them also ; but with less of understanding. Stung to irritation by a sense of vague happenings in which he counted for nothing, and by the fact that Quita was evidently enjoying herself far more than the occasion seemed to warrant, he was in no mood to do justice to the supreme event of the day — his dinner. Strange foods, too, were an abomination to his clockwork order of mind ; and when, in addition, he found himself condemned to eat them sitting cross-legged on the ground, a leaf balanced precariously on one knee, he began to entertain grave doubts as to the comparative values of the game and the candle.

He quite resented the manifest contentment of Elsie Mayhew and her partner, who sat facing him, absorbed in the low-toned talk of incipient lovers, blind and deaf to the insignificant doings around them. Nor was he greatly blest in his left-hand partner, Bathurst, the Rajah's tutor — a clean-limbed athlete of the two-adjective genus, who discoursed complacently of "bags," "mounts," and handicaps ; the staple topics of his kind. And while the stream of words flowed on, unchecked by his flagrant inattention, Garth's ears were tantalised by snatches of talk from the lively end of the table, where Desmond and Quita were behaving like two children ; by the silver quality of her laughter that whipped his senses, while it lulled his conscience like a narcotic, and set him devising a moonlight stroll with her later on, in the Palace courtyard, by way of compensation for present martyrdom endured on her account. For since the night of the dance she had been so uniformly gracious, that he was beginning to regard his rebuff on Dynkund as little more than a delicate prelude to surrender after all.

Such absorbing reflections made him so neglectful of his hostess, that the little lady's spasmodic efforts to enliven him with spiced snippets of gossip — more than one item of which had emanated from himself — fizzled out dismally, long before the meal was over ; and it was with

an audible sigh of relief that she glanced across at Mrs Desmond, and got upon her feet with as much dignity as a cushion, a plump figure, and cramped limbs would allow.

"What? You do not desert us?" Quita asked, as Desmond offered her his arm.

"No—I do not desert you!" He spoke lightly, but significance lurked in his tone. "The Rajah and his suite are waiting to receive us in the Durbar Hall, and unless you object to my cigar, or send me to the right-about, I claim you as my prisoner of war for the evening!"

"*À la bonheur!* Smoke as much as you please. You will not need to tie a thread round my ankle, I promise you. Why didn't I get to know you sooner?"

"Perhaps because you discovered metal more attractive?"

The light thrust drew blood. She flushed, and laughed uneasily.

"A palpable hit! I might retaliate with a coal of fire in the shape of a compliment. But you don't deserve it. Anyway, let's make up for lost time now. I have a feeling that we shall be good friends, only"

"Only—what?"

"Mrs Desmond may disapprove of me."

"You'd not say that if you knew her better," he answered, warmly. "She isn't one of your good women who make a hobby of disapproval."

"That's a mercy! It is the pet vice of the virtuous; and Mrs Mayhew deals in it largely. No doubt it keeps her happy, and makes her feel superior; and I wouldn't rob my worst enemy of such a heavenly sensation! I'm sorry for her to-night, though. She hates natives almost as much as Colonel Mayhew loves them: and I'm afraid she's not enjoying herself; nor will poor Elsie, if Captain Lenox makes *her* a prisoner of war for the evening! He hardly vouchsafed her half a dozen words through dinner."

"Lenox is no conversationalist," Desmond answered, looking straight before him. "But he is a splendid fellow—worth fifty of your drawing-room acrobats."

"You like him so much, then?"

"I do more than that. I admire him."

"You are an enthusiast!"

The shadow of change in her tone did not escape him.

"Is that also one of the vices you detest?"

"But, no! I gave you credit for more discernment. Enthusiasts and idealists are the salt of the earth. That's why I want to know more of *you*. There! In spite of myself I have crowned you with a coal of fire after all! Now, please introduce me to our resplendent Rajah Sahib. I am going to make him talk. Colonel Mayhew has dared me to succeed!"

They entered the Durbar Hall as she spoke—a long room overloaded with gilt furniture, gilt-framed mirrors, and the inevitable chandeliers and musical boxes that are the insignia of semi-civilised opulence throughout India. No self-respecting Maharajah, or Rana, or Nawab would dream of living in a Palace devoid of either.

Rajah Govind Singh and his four companions stood together by a marble-topped table, laughing and whispering over a book filled with photographs of music-hall celebrities, while beside it a spurious album, whose heart was a musical box, tinkled an age-old air from "Les Cloches" with maddening precision. At the far end of the room a native conjurer had established himself, and was already performing indefatigably for the benefit of no one in particular.

The group by the table showed a medley of colour quite in keeping with the flash and glitter of the whole. Over spotless shirts and trousers the boys wore brilliant silk *chogas*,¹ cunningly patterned with gold wire, and surmounted by turbans of palest primrose, orange, and green. But Govind Singh, by divine right of Rajahdom, eclipsed the rest. Beneath his scarlet coat gleamed a waistcoat of woven gold, and the jewelled buckle of his Rajput *chuprass*.² Three strings of pearls formed a close collar at his throat, and in front of his sea-green turban a heron's plume sprang from a cluster of brilliants. The faces of all were no darker than ripe wheat; for your high-caste hill-man never takes colour, like his brother of the plains.

They had long since eaten their own simple dinner, in the scantiest clothing, and in a solemn silence, squatting

¹ Long loose coats.

² Cross-belt.

on a bare mud floor. For to the Hindu a meal is a sacred ceremony, and the Sahib's idiosyncrasy for making merry over his food can only be accepted as part and parcel of his bewildering lack of sense and dignity in regard to the conduct of life.

During a long minority this boy had been zealously inoculated with Western knowledge and Western points of view; and with the deceptive pliancy of the Oriental he had smilingly submitted to the process. But deep down in the unplumbed heart of him he waited for the good day when he would be rid of these well-meaning interlopers,—tireless as their own fire-carriages,—who troubled the still waters of life and talked so vigorously about nothing in particular; when he would be free to forget cricket and polo and futile efforts to cleanse the State from intrigue; free to sit down in peace and grow fat, unhindered by the senseless machinations of the outer world.

And in the heart of Govind Singh you have a fair epitome of the great heart of India herself: aloof, long-suffering, illogical to a degree inconceivable by Western minds; ready to lavish deep-hearted devotion upon individual Nicholsons and Lawrences when they come her way; yet, for all her surface submission and progress, not an inch nearer to racial sympathy, or to the inner significance of English life and character than she was fifty years ago.

But, in the meanwhile, our concern is with a minor Maharajah, and his passion for musical boxes.

At the Resident's approach, the laughter and whispering ceased; and the four boys endured with impassive politeness the mysterious rite of introduction. The tinkling album gave Quita her cue. She insisted on hearing its entire repertoire, which was mercifully limited; and her natural ease of manner, her knack of plunging wholeheartedly into the subject of the moment, soon put Govind Singh's shyness to flight. He deserted monosyllables for clipped, hurried sentences, jerked out with an odd mixture of nervousness and self-satisfaction. Quita flashed a smile at Desmond, who stood sentry at her elbow, in seeming ignorance of the fact that Garth was making tentative attempts to usurp his place.

" You must show me some of the others, Rajah Sahib," she declared, as the complacent album clicked into silence, " and when I go home to England I will hunt you up a new kind to add to your collection ! "

The boy's eyes lost their look of lazy indifference ; a gleam of superb teeth illumined his face.

" An upright grand is the last trifling addition to it, Miss Maurice," Colonel Mayhew informed her, " but the Rajah was a little disappointed when he found that it couldn't be set going by the turning of a key."

" I am liking the big noise—the big *tamasha*," the young monarch explained in all gravity. " And I think that one is too much price for a box that will do nothing unless somebody knows to make it speak."

" Mrs Desmond can make it speak for you, Rajah Sahib," Colonel Mayhew suggested ; and the boy turned upon her with shy eagerness.

" Can you really do a tune ? " he asked.

" Several tunes ! " she answered, smiling. " A big noise, if you like."

" Oh, that is very good business. Thanks awfully."

He spoke the slang phrases, picked up from Bathurst, with mechanical precision ; and Honor, still smiling, went over to the piano—a flamboyant instrument of rosewood and gold. After a second of hesitation Lenox followed, opened it for her, and resting a hand on the gilt back of her chair, bent down to speak to her before she began to play. The suggestion of intimacy in his attitude was not lost on Quita, who saw it all, without glancing in their direction. Her lips tightened ; and she started slightly when Desmond spoke to her.

" Will you go round the musical boxes with me ? " he asked, in an undertone that bordered on tenderness. For he saw that something in her suffered, whether it were pride or love.

" But yes—by all means," she answered, with a lift of her head which suggested to Desmond a jerk on the curb-chain. In moving off together they passed close to Garth. But Quita, who was abstractedly opening and closing her fan, did not seem aware of his presence ; and he stood looking after them—nonplussed and inwardly blasphem-

ing. He did not hold the key to this new phase of the situation.

Mrs Mayhew—noting his detachment from the Palace group, and quite needlessly alarmed lest politeness should impel him to return to her—sought out a strategic seat near the piano; though in truth Honor Desmond's masterly rendering of Chopin's heroic polonaise was, for her, no more than a complicated tumult of sound without sense, and her wrapt expression resulted from the fact that she was debating whether her *durzi* could possibly reproduce at sight the subtle simplicity of Mrs Desmond's evening gown. For she had sons growing up at home—this insignificant woman, whose plump proportions and bird-like eyes had earned her the nickname of "the Button Quail"; and even a good appointment did not annul the vagaries of the rupee, which was behaving peculiarly ill just then. In the intervals of imaginary dressmaking, she was enjoying shrewd speculations as to the nature and extent of the budding "affair" between the two at the piano; for her small mind clung tenaciously to the Noah's Ark view of life. Also it seemed that Elsie's own "little affair" was assuming quite a promising aspect. Personally, she disliked the man, but his talent was undeniable. She supposed he must be making money by it; and he was quite clearly making a right-of-way into her daughter's heart.

They had drifted apart from the rest without need of spoken suggestion; and now, under cover of Honor's music, which produced a tendency to gravitate towards the piano, the man grew bolder.

"There is moonlight out in the courtyard," he said, very low; and he tried, without success, to look into her eyes. "*Que dites-vous?* Shall we go?"

She did not answer at once. A new spirit of boldness was awake in her, urging her to take hold of her golden hour with both hands, nothing doubting. But the man, even when he charmed her most, failed to inspire her trust. And while she stood hesitating, his gaze never left her face.

"Are you thinking it would scandalise *la petite mère*?"

"It might. She is easily scandalised!"

“ But you would like to come ? ”

“ Yes—I would like to come.”

“ *Eh bien*—that is enough.”

“ Is it ? ”

She looked up at him now with those great, truthful eyes of hers, which he found oddly disconcerting at times.

“ Enough for me, at all events ! ” he answered boldly.
“ Come ! ”

And she came.

The flagged quadrangle, walled in with darkness and worn with the tread of numberless women’s feet, showed silver-grey in the light of a moon nearing the full ; and above it, in a square patch of sky, stars sparkled with a veiled radiance like diamonds caught in a film of gossamer. As Elsie emerged from the shadow of the verandah, she had a sense of stepping into an unreal world, and the Palace walls, shutting out the familiar contours of earth, strengthened the illusion. The night seemed the accomplice of her mood, in league with her own exquisite sensibility ; a night created for sheltering tenderness.

Michael Maurice, divining her sensations with the uncanny accuracy of his type, pressed a little closer to her as they walked, so that now and again, as if by chance, his arm brushed her own, and each contact quickened her happy commotion of heart and pulse. They came upon a rough stone bench, and he paused.

“ It is pleasanter to sit, *n'est-ce pas ?* ”

“ Yes. But we mustn’t sit long.”

“ Mustn’t we ? How does one measure time on such a night as this ? By the beating of hearts, or by the pulsations of stars ? ”

She laughed softly.

“ How foolish you are ! ”

“ It is good to be foolish at the right time, and with the right person ! Wisdom is the death’s-head at the feast of life. But we are going to shut her outside the door for a whole week—you and I.”

The strangely sweet magic of those linked pronouns stirred Elsie as never before ; though the sound of them had pleased her once, not a little, on the lips of Kenneth

Malcolm. But she answered lightly, as women will, when they feel barriers giving way.

“I never knew I had agreed to anything so desperate!”

He had laid his arm along the back of the seat; so that his hand was within an inch of her shoulder. He moved it closer.

“You have done more than that without knowing it—*petite amie*,” he said, yielding himself, as always, to the witchery of the moment. “It is your doing that I have achieved an inspired picture. It is your doing that I want this week in Arcadia to be an idyll we shall neither of us forget—an idyll of sunlight, moonshine, and blessed freedom from *les convenances*. No past—no future—only the present; and in it two spirits tuned to one key. That is the secret of perfect enjoyment.”

She shook her head.

“I don’t quite understand. It sounds too fantastic. The past and the future are there always. One can’t get rid of them.”

“But one can shut the door on them when they threaten to disturb the present, which is the great reality after all.”

“Can one? You seem to have a talent for shutting doors!”

“A convenient talent; worth cultivating! You may take my word for it.”

Something in the statement or its manner of utterance jarred, ever so slightly,—threatened to break the charm that held her.

“Dangerously convenient,” she murmured, in gentle reproof.

“Little Puritan! What a narrow track you walk upon. Hardly room on it for two abreast. Is there?”

The last words were almost a whisper. He pressed nearer, bringing his face close to hers. At the same moment she felt a light touch on her shoulder, and drawing back to escape the disturbing eloquence of his eyes, she discovered the presence of his encircling arm. The discovery brought her to her feet—flushed, palpitating, aquiver with anger at this first shadow of insult to her maidenhood.

“Will you take me in again, please?” she said quietly,

and the request savoured of command. For her gentle nature was founded on a rock ; and a very little below the unresisting surface one came upon adamant, pure and simple. But the unabashed Frenchman caught one of her hands, and crushed it against his lips.

“*Petite amie*—forgive me ! I was overbold. I am not fit to touch the hem of your dress. But one is only flesh and blood ; and you . . . say you are not angry with me, in your heart . . .”

She drew her hand away decisively ; and with unconscious cruelty rubbed the back of it against her dress, as if to remove a stain.

“I am angry—I have a right to be angry,” she answered in the same toneless voice. “And if you will not come in with me, I shall go alone.”

He rose then ; and they crossed the enchanted courtyard together—a clear foot of space between them.

The brilliance of the Durbar Hall smote the girl painfully. It was as though the light had power to penetrate and reveal her hidden perturbation. Without looking up, she felt her mother’s eyes upon her ; and the wild-rose tint of her cheeks deepened under their scrutiny. But she avoided meeting them, and, going straight to her father, slipped a small hand under his arm. She felt indefinably in need of protection, not only from the man, whose kiss had moved her more than he guessed, but from herself, and the new emotions quickening at her heart ; and in all times of trouble she turned spontaneously to her father. He was the true parent of her spirit ; and, but for the matter-of-fact, half-condescending devotion of three boys at home, Mrs Mayhew might, at times, have felt left out in the cold.

“Enjoying yourself, little girl ?” the father asked, smiling down at her.

“Yes, of course, dear—ever so much,” she replied, with brave untruthfulness ; and the lie must have been forgiven her in heaven.

But the veil of enchantment was rent ; and no needle of earth has ever been ground fine enough to draw its frayed edges together.

CHAPTER X.

"Woman, I grope to find you ; but I cannot.
O, is there no way to you, and no path,—
No winding path?"

—S. PHILLIPS.

ALL the good folk of Chumba,—men, women, and children,—were early astir on this June day, in whose fiery lap lay hid the luck of the State for the coming year.

The stone streets of the little town, so steep as to be cut out, here and there, into a rough semblance of steps, were alive with quickly moving figures, in holiday attire: which, in the East, is a true outward and visible sign of its wearer's inward and spiritual sense of festivity.

Open shop fronts and quaintly carven balconies were noisy with shrill voices. Every self-respecting house was plastered with fresh mud; every window and doorway garlanded with marigold and jasmine buds; every brain, absorbed in the paramount speculation, as to how the sacrificial buffalo would behave.

At three o'clock, under a blazing sun, the Rajah set out, enthroned on his State elephant, whose silver howdah and gala trappings formed a fitting pedestal for the red and gold magnificence of the young prince himself. Two ropes of pearls hung down to his waist: a huge uncut emerald made a vivid incident of green upon his gilded chest: and the diamond aigrette, surmounting his turban of palest green muslin, flashed and quivered in the sunshine, like living fire. The Resident, in immaculate grey suit and tall white helmet, sat beside him in the awkwardly swaying howdah with an admirable air of comfort and unconcern; and their triumphal progress was enlivened by the brazen cheerfulness of trumpets and trombones, the melancholy squeal of bagpipes, and the ear-piercing shriek of native instruments; while, through all, and above all, and under all, the throbbing of innumerable tom-toms suggested the heart-beats of the mighty crowd made audible.

Journeying thus, along the unshadowed road that over-

hangs the river, they came at length to the promontory itself. Here, beneath the huge State *shamianah*, gaily coloured Kashmir rugs were spread, for Govind Singh and his court: while curtained enclosures, set at duly decorous distance, concealed the women-folk, who had been conveyed thither under close cover much earlier in the day.

Through the surging chattering crowd,—which fell back right and left before their quietly determined advance,—the Residency party made their way in to the partial shade of the *shamianah*, wherein chairs had been set for the English guests; four on either side of the Palace group.

It was a very dignified Elsie who slid to the ground before Maurice could get to her, and carefully avoided his reproachful gaze. But he followed her into the tent, and took his seat beside her unrebuked. The trifling incident of the night before had increased not merely her charm but her value in his eyes. If this were not the 'real thing,' he reflected, in a virtuous glow of self-approval, then surely there could be no reality on earth.

At this moment he became aware that Garth and Mrs Desmond were established in the two neighbouring chairs. His surprise at this unexpected conjunction showed so plainly in his face that Honor, meeting his glance, responded with dimples of sheer enjoyment before devoting herself to the entertainment of her victim.

Desmond, in pursuance of a policy which at least saved Lenox from the sharpest sting of all, had managed to ride close behind Quita and Garth; and being nimbler in dismounting than the older man, had successfully usurped his privilege of lifting her from the saddle. She herself, though not a little puzzled as to the meaning of it all, was beginning to relish the humour of the game; and as Desmond escorted her into the tent, she turned upon him a smile of unabashed amusement.

"This is flattering! I appear to have made a conquest of *Monsieur le Capitaine*!"

"And for once appearances are not deceitful," he capped her straight.

"How enchantingly direct you are! But at this rate Mrs Desmond really *will* disapprove . . ."

"No fear! Mrs Desmond is enjoying it quite as much as I am!"

She divined a hidden meaning in his words: but merely lifted her eyebrows and shoulders in characteristic fashion.

"Well—if *she* doesn't object, I am sure I don't!"

"Nor I, by any means. . . . Come this way."

He led her across the tent, having noted and admired his wife's skilful bit of strategy: and Lenox instinctively took the same direction.

Quita chose the chair farthest from the Palace group; and in a few moments, she knew that her husband was standing close behind her. It was the first time he had deliberately approached her since their encounter at the ball: and the silent tribute, so characteristic of the man, elated her with a renewed sense of power over a personality immeasurably stronger than her own. It was like bringing down big game after the mild diversion of shooting pheasants. But he had spent the whole morning in the verandah with Honor Desmond; and the remembrance still rankled. Upset her equanimity as he might, the spirit of surrender was still far from her.

At his approach Desmond made a slight movement, as if to rise; but the other shook his head. It was enough to be thus close to her, to feel that speech was possible, yet not compulsory. All of which Desmond was quick to understand.

"Look, . . . look . . ." Quita whispered suddenly, leaning towards him. "They are forcing that poor brute to the edge. He has been in before. Colonel Mayhew told me. He knows; . . . he is afraid. Oh, *mon Dieu*, how horrible! . . . He is over!"

A mighty shout from the assembled thousands, who stood ten and twenty deep along the banks, confirmed her words. The shuddering victim had been forced over the ten-foot drop; and for a few breathless moments, was lost in the green swirling water. A second shout,—unanimous, as from one Gargantuan throat,—heralded the reappearance of the flat black head, with its dilated nostrils held well above the blinding wreaths of foam. Tossed mercilessly from boulder to boulder, the stout swimmer neared the first big rapid; and a moment later was swept, an

unresisting log, into its treacherous clutches. Out of it he plunged, still swimming valiantly; and, despite the opposing force of the current, made a bold dash for one of the few possible landings on the town bank. But the people, foreseeing the attempt from long experience, were gathered at this particular danger-point in overwhelming numbers; with the result that the unhappy beast was fairly hustled back into the boiling stream.

Here the second rapid claimed him; and excitement became intense; for the fate of a year hung trembling in the balance. There was no shouting now; but a breathless expectant silence. Only the river,—full of sound and fury,—babbled unceasingly to the majestic sky.

The moment of uncertainty was short as it was tense. Once more the brave black head appeared, a blot on the foam-flecked surface, no longer battling, with dilated nostrils, against fearful odds; but lying sideways, inert . . . lifeless; . . . and a prolonged outburst of shouting, clapping, and huzzaing informed the echoing hills that the great spirit of rivers and streams had accepted the sacrifice; that the luck of the State was established for twelve good months to come.

“Poor beast, poor plucky beast!” Quita murmured rebelliously. Her sympathies had been strangely stirred; and an unbidden moisture clouded her eyes. In that hapless drowned buffalo she beheld, not a mere dead animal, but one victim the more to the eternal law of sacrifice:—the law that makes one man’s suffering the price of another man’s gain;—the law that lies at the root of half the tragedy of the world. “How happy they all are!” she went on. “That Rajah boy is delighted. They have no imaginations these people. So much the better for them!”

By now the *shamianah* hummed with talk and laughter and congratulation on the outcome of the *Mela*. Every one had risen; and Desmond turned with the rest to add his quota to the polite speeches that were the order of the moment.

But Quita, still intent upon the stirring scene without, moved forward a little space to obtain a better view of the river and the crowd. Lenox followed her; and with

a start she became aware that he was standing almost at her elbow; though still a little behind her, so that she must turn if she wanted to see his face.

"Are you wishing you could put some of that on canvas?" he asked in a voice that he vainly strove to render natural.

"Yes. It would be such a triumphant riot of colour. But I'm afraid it would look crude and impossible in any frame except the frame of an Indian sky."

She did not turn in speaking; but the softness of her voice soothed his chafed spirit like a benediction, and robbed him for the moment of all power to reply.

"I was really trying to stamp it all on my memory," she went on after a pause. "It is a sight one doesn't see twice in a lifetime. Just for a few seconds it was terrible. But I would not have missed it for the world."

"Nor I. Now that I am here, I feel grateful to the Desmonds for persuading me to come."

"Did they have to drag you here by main force?"

"Not quite! I thought I had better stay and grind at my book; that was all. But they wouldn't hear of it."

"Do you always obey their orders implicitly?" There was veiled scorn in her tone, and a new warmth in his as he replied:

"I would do any mortal thing they asked me to, within reason. In all my life no two people have been so good to me."

"You evidently admire *her* very much." The stress on the pronoun was too delicate to catch his notice.

"I do, immensely. How could any man in his senses do otherwise? Or, for that matter, any woman either? I hoped—I thought—you would have been good friends with her."

He spoke his honest enthusiasm in the simple desire that she should share it. But her nerves were still strung to concert pitch, and he had struck the wrong note.

"You thought her many virtues might have an improving effect on me, I suppose?"

The scorn was no longer veiled: and he winced under it.

"No: only it occurred to me that the two . . . best women I have ever known might reasonably have a good deal in common."

"It is kind of you to couple me with her. I am flattered, I assure you!—But, personally, I prefer something less exalted; something more human, more fallible. . . ."

"Perhaps that explains your predilection for Garth?" he broke in abruptly, pricked to resentment by her persistent note of mockery.

"I am not aware that my friendship with Major Garth requires any sort of explanation."

She was rigid now—face, voice, figure: his golden opportunity gone past recall. Men pay as dearly for sins of ignorance as for the baser kinds of trespass: and the man who does not understand women is almost worse, in their esteem, than the man who treats them ill.

"Is it wise—for your own sake . . . to be so careless of your good name?" he persisted desperately; goaded by the knowledge that he would not soon get speech of her again.

"Possibly not. But I don't feel called upon to retire into a convent, or to advertise the fact that I am not . . . 'on the market.' Nor do I choose to have my conduct called in question by any man living."

She faced him now;—defiant, a bright spot on either cheek.

And before he knew how to answer her, Colonel Mayhew was upon them, overflowing with cheerful raillery, and radiantly unaware that he had stepped into a powder magazine.

Long before the returning procession reached the Residency, Quita had repented of her little-minded display of irritation, consoling herself with the resolve that she would atone for it next time; whereas Lenox had decided that for once Honor Desmond's intuition was at fault: that it needed no 'bogey of heredity' to widen the impassable gulf dividing him from his wife.

CHAPTER XI.

“O all that in me wanders, and is wild,
Gathers into one wave, and breaks on thee.”

—PHILLIPS.

IN the deep heart of Kalatope Forest, where the trees fall apart as if by unanimous consent, the natural glade of Kajiar lies like a giant emerald under a turquoise sky. Peace broods over this sanctuary of Nature's making, dove-like, with folded wings. No lightest echo of the world's turmoil and strife disturbs the stillness. Only at dawn and dusk, the thin note of the temple bell, the chanting of priests, and the unearthly minor wail of conches, announce the downsitting and uprising of the little stone image of godhead, housed in a picturesque temple that nestles among low trees, beside the Holy Lake, at the southern end of the glade.

For Hindus are the most devout Nature-worshippers on the face of the earth. To them, beauty of place translates itself as God's direct cry to the soul; and in the isolated glade of Kajiar, with its sweep of shelving turf, its encircling pines and deodars, and its towering snow-peaks standing sentinel in the north,—deity reigns supreme; deity and the great grey ape of the Himalayas.

Only for one week in the year does Kajiar spring full-fledged into a place of human significance. From Dalhousie, on the one hand, and from Chumba on the other, a light-hearted crowd of revellers profanes the quiet of earth and sky. On the outskirts of the forest tents spring up, like mushrooms, in a night; the devotional voices of the temple are drowned in the clamour of bugles, the throb of racing hoofs, the challenging gaiety of the band, and the heart-stirring wail of the Royal Chumba Pipers; wiry hill-men, in kilts and tartans;—the pride of the young Rajah's heart.

The 'Kajiar week' is the central event of Dalhousie's season:—an Arcadian revel of perfumed shadow, and sun-warmed earth; a carnival of camp-life; ushering in the

gloom of the Great Rains ;—the triple tyranny of mist, mildew, and mackintoshes. And early on the morning after the *Mela*,—while the breath of night still lingered in gorges and ravines, and in shadowed patches of the ascending path, a mixed procession of men and horses, shuffling mules, and trotting coolies wound, snake-like, out of the Chumba valley towards Kalatope Forest and the emerald glade.

All the Rajah's party was mounted, save Mrs Mayhew and the medical missionary's wife, who preferred the leisurely ease of their dandies: and in the van of the procession, a hundred yards and more in advance of it, Quita rode with James Garth.

Her husband's bearing throughout the previous evening had convinced her that their passage of arms in the *shamianah* had killed the budding possibility of a better understanding between them: and the fact that she was to blame, did not make the knowledge easier to bear. For she knew now—knew consciously—that she craved the love and admiration of this big silent husband of hers, as she had never yet craved anything in earth or heaven: that his mere presence disturbed every fibre of her in a fashion she had hitherto believed impossible; that his aloofness drew and held her, as no other man's ardour had ever done. These two days of closer contact, of hearing his voice, of watching, without seeming to watch, the familiar movements of his face and figure, had waked to conscious life germs that had long lain at her heart, quickening in darkness.

But pride was a stubborn element in her. Where she gave greatly, she demanded greatly. The fact that he had taken her to task bred a suspicion that she had been sought out for that purpose, not because he could no longer keep away: and his evident determination to give her no chance of retrieving the damage done in a moment of irritation, brought her near to defiance,—the danger-point of her nature. Hence renewed encouragement of Garth, with intent to italicise her Declaration of Independence; and with a half-acknowledged hope that Lenox might be goaded by jealousy to renewed remonstrance.

And Garth,—who was used to the bestowal, rather than the receipt of favours,—accepted this woman's encouragement as gratefully as an enamoured subaltern. Desmond's recent tactics had but served to convince him that the walls of Jericho must be carried by assault. Whatever the outcome, the thrill of conquest must at least be his.

The six-foot roadway up to Kajiar gave him ample excuse for riding needlessly close to his companion; and he inclined himself closer in talking, thus giving a provocative flavour to ordinary speech.

“I think, in common fairness, it is my turn for an innings again,—don't you?”

She laughed, and lifted her shoulders, evading direct reply.

“Does that mean that you care nothing, one way or other?” There was smothered passion in his tone.

“And if it does?—What then?”

“Gad! How coolly you stab a poor devil, whose worst sin is that he is in——” But before the word was out, she checked him sharply.

“Major Garth!—How *dare* you?”

Her white-hot anger seared both his vanity and his heart. But he had courage of a sort: and he stood his ground.

“A man in my case will dare anything. Besides, you have insight enough to have known it these many weeks; and why should the plain statement anger you, when evidently the plain fact does not?—Tell me that.”

The question smote her to silence. For she could not tell him: neither could she answer hotly and break with him for good. Throughout the coming week, at least, their intimacy must remain intact; and beyond it her mind refused to look. She saw herself caught in a tangle of her own making: a hot wave of vexation at her helplessness, at her cruelly false position, fired her face from chin to brow.

But Garth, noting the phenomenon, interpreted it otherwise.

“You find my riddle unanswerable?” he questioned almost tenderly: and was met by a lightning-flash of denial.

"No. By no means! The answer is simple enough. Unhappily you cannot wipe out—the fact. But you can avoid expressing it: and you *must*,—unless you are prepared to lose everything."

"By Jove, no!—I keep what I have gained,—at any price. And at least your proffer of friendship gives me better right to monopolise you than that chap Desmond can lay claim to. But he appears to be privileged."

"He is privileged."

"How so?"

"Simply by being the right sort of man."

Garth scrutinised her keenly.

"And a V.C. into the bargain—eh? I don't mind betting that's half the attraction. Just a showy bit of pluck, dashed off at a hot-headed moment—and you women turn a man into a god on the strength of it! The fellow got his chance, and took it—that's all."

It is of the nature of small minds to disparage great ones; and in general Quita would have dismissed the matter with a light retort. But in her present mood, the man's petty personalities jarred more than usual. "I think we won't discuss Captain Desmond," she said without looking round. "To pick holes in a man of that quality only seems to accentuate one's own littleness."

"Yours—or mine?"

"Both."

"By Jove—but you're frank!"

"Have you ever known me otherwise?"

"Can't say I have.—But I'm hanged if I know what's come to you these last two days! Except that you are always far too alluring for my peace of mind, you hardly seem like the same woman."

The truth of his assertion wrenched her back to a lighter mood.

"What an alarming accusation! Is any healthily intelligent and progressive human being ever the same for many weeks together? Change—readjustment—is the keynote of life; the very breath of it. When you can accuse me of *not* changing I shall know that I have fallen into the sere and withered leaf past redemption. And now that I have explained myself—(prob-

ably to your more complete confusion!)—we'll have a short canter to blow away cobwebs. The road is rather less breakneck just here."

A flick of the whip sent Yorick forward at a bound; and Garth—stifling unheroic qualms—could not choose but follow her daring lead.

Throughout the remaining eight miles neither her tongue nor her spirit flagged; and for the man at least the journey's end came too soon.

It was a transformed Kajiar that basked in the full glory of noon, as they emerged from the forest, and drew rein on the high ground behind the little wooden rest-house, to enjoy a few moments' survey of the brilliant scene.

At the far end, around the Rajah's private châlet, the native camp was fast springing into life. While, down in the northern hollow, where white tents clustered thickest, lay the big general camp; the core of all things social and frivolous.

Hurdles, water jumps, and a long tent pavilion had changed the centre of the glade into a racecourse, where subalterns, undaunted by a blazing sun, were practising ponies for forthcoming gymkhanas. Goal-posts were already fixed for the great yearly football match between Chumba and Dalhousie; in which contest victory was by no means always to the West, since Jeff Bathurst, a famous performer, trained and captained the Chumba team: and in another part of the green, three wooden sign-posts of unequal height gave promise of tilting matches to come.

Couples and groups, in the lightest of muslins and flannels, sauntered idly in the scented shadow of the pines; or lounged, smoking and talking, on the warm green earth.

The appeal of the whole was to a spirit of enjoyment pure and simple, to the casting aside of care and thought; a passing respite from the shadow of the future: and Quita's native zest for happiness urged her to instant response.

“Unborn To-morrow, and dead Yesterday,
Why fret about them, if To-day be sweet,”

she quoted softly. “That is clearly the motto of the week;

and it looks as if every one intended to live up to it,—conscientiously."

Garth saw his advantage and pressed it home.

"You and I among the number, eh? At least we understand one another, which is more than most of those philandering couples do. Why shouldn't we make the most of our seven golden days and leave next week to look after itself?"

"Why not, indeed?"

She spoke absently; her eyes resting on the snow-peak in the north. The answer lay too deep down for utterance. But Garth took her enigmatical echo for acquiescence, and laid his plans accordingly.

Nor were these two the only pair who arrived at Garth's philosophical conclusion. Life was fulfilled, for the nonce, with laughter and leisure; with the unchanging, passion-breathing blue and gold of a Himalayan June; and on all sides the charmed circle of pines and deodars shut them off from the forgotten world and 'them that dwell therein.'

Atmosphere, circumstance, and her own half-awakened heart conspired with Michael Maurice to draw Elsie down, by slow and delicious degrees, from the small pedestal whereon she had taken refuge since the night of the Palace dinner; till all unaware, she acceded to his fantastic notion of shutting the door upon Wisdom. Nor was it long before those whose profit and pleasure it is to make capital out of their neighbours' doings had assured themselves and each other that the 'week' would be responsible for two engagements at least.

Such talk did not readily reach Lenox's ears. But Kenneth Malcolm, whose aspirations were no secret to the busily idle world around him, was speedily enlightened: and there could be neither peace nor rest for him till he had confirmation or denial from Elsie's lips.

Six months earlier he had pleaded his cause with such halting eloquence as he could command; and the girl's refusal had been qualified by a confession that at least she preferred him to any other man of her acquaintance. On the strength of this admission the boy had simply stood aside and waited: hoping, as only the young can hope,

because the fervour of their desire renders the possibility of non-fulfilment unthinkable. Then Maurice had entered the field, carrying all before him, with the inimitable assurance that was his; and by now Kenneth had reached the agony-point in a painful, if educative experience. Standing aside was no longer endurable. By some means he must secure Elsie, if only for ten minutes, and discover the truth.

"And a man need only look into her eyes for that," he decided, with a throb of troubled anticipation.

His opportunity came on the third day of the 'week.' The great football match between East and West was progressing vigorously to the tune of shouts and cheers. Maurice, who had small taste for sport, had gone sketching with his sister at her urgent request; and as Elsie settled herself, with a book, on a slope of hot pine-needles, she was surprised and startled to see Kenneth Malcolm approaching her.

"May I sit here for a little?" he asked. "I have hardly had two words with you since you came back from Chumba. I suppose you enjoyed it all tremendously?"

"Oh yes. It was delightful. Do sit down."

The restraint of his manner was infectious, as restraint is apt to be; and she was hampered by a prescience of things to come.

"I was awfully keen to go too," he said, as he obeyed her. "But perhaps it's just as well that I didn't get the chance, judging from . . . from what I hear."

"You shouldn't judge from what you hear," she murmured.

"Shouldn't I? But unluckily it fits in with . . . what I see. Miss Mayhew . . ." he pressed forward, his eyes searching her face, devout worship in the sincere blue depths of them. "Will you be angry with me, if I ask you a straight question?"

She shook her head.

"And will you give me a straight answer?"

"If I can."

"Is it true that you are likely to . . . marry Maurice?"

"Not that I know of." He took a great breath, like a condemned man who hears his reprieve.

"Then, may I still believe . . . what you told me at Lahore ?"

Her answer seemed an eternity in coming ; for a plain 'yes' or 'no' were equally far from the truth. This boy of four-and-twenty gave her the restful sense of reliance and reserve force that she so missed in Maurice. But there was no art, no thrill in his love-making. It was direct and simple as himself. He never struck a chord of emotion and left it quivering, as Maurice had done many times.

"May I ?"—he persisted gently.

"I still think you are . . . the best man I know," she admitted, without looking at him ; and he flushed to the roots of his hair.

"But not the one you — care for most ? It's that that matters, you know."

"Oh, I can't tell—truly I can't," she pleaded distressfully.

"Then I must just go on waiting."

"I wish you wouldn't even do that."

"I can only prevent it by putting a bullet through my head."

The quiet finality of his tone was more convincing than volumes of protestations ; and she shuddered.

"Don't say such things, please.—You hurt me."

"I wouldn't do that for a kingdom. But it's the truth.—I go down on the fifteenth, you know."

"Yes.—I'm sorry."

"Are you ? Then why—oh, I don't understand you !" he broke off in despair.

"I'm not sure that I understand myself — yet. It takes time, I suppose."

"Not when the right chap turns up, I fancy. But I'll give you as much time as you want. I have a year's leave due. Shall I take it, and go home ?"

She looked rueful.

"A year is a long time. But perhaps that would be best. You might find—some one else there, who understood herself better."

"That's out of the question," he answered almost harshly.

"But at all events,—I'll go."

A prolonged silence followed this statement: and when he spoke again, it was of other things. Elsie followed suit: but the result was not brilliant. She endured the strain as long as she could; then inventing an excuse, she left him; though, to her surprise, it hurt her more than she could have believed a week ago.

That afternoon, during the progress of a hybrid gymkhana,—ranging from steeplechasing to obstacle races for men and natives,—the first whisper of current gossip reached Lenox's ears.

Standing behind a restless row of hats and parasols, he was watching with some interest the preliminary canter of a horse he had backed heavily, when Garth and Quita, deep in animated talk, passed across the line of chairs, and a woman close to Lenox turned to her neighbour.

"*That* match is a certainty, Mrs Mayhew. Say what you like. I'm sure of it. I only wonder it hasn't been given out before now."

Mrs Mayhew shifted her parasol and inspected the retreating pair through her gold-rimmed pince-nez, as though, by examining their shoulder-blades, she could determine the exact state of their hearts.

"I don't quite know *what* to think," she remarked with judicial emphasis. "I don't believe anything is a certainty where Major Garth is concerned. But if they are not engaged they *ought* to be! I don't like that girl, though. She is much too independent for my taste; and engagement or no, she probably let's Major Garth make love to her. He would never have stuck to her for six months otherwise."

On the last words Lenox started as if a cold finger-tip had touched his heart. Such a thought had never occurred to him: and he could have murdered, without compunction, the small self-satisfied woman who had lodged the poisoned shaft in his mind.

Turning on his heel, he made straight for his tent, where a littered camp-table gave proof that the art of taking a holiday could not be reckoned among his accomplishments. Then he sat down by it and bowed his head upon his hands. To doubt his wife's integrity was rank

insult. Yet he knew Garth's evil reputation ; knew also that the suggestion would cling to his memory like a limpet, and torture him in the endless hours of wakefulness from which there was now no way of escape.

Enforced abstinence from tobacco and stimulants had told severely upon his nerves, appetite, and health ; and a foretaste of the sleepless night ahead of him tempted him to regret his hasty destruction of the bottle of chlorodyne, which had not been replaced.

Till dusk he worked without intermission ; and, as if by a fiendish nicety of calculation, the evening mail-bag, —brought out by runner from Dalhousie,—contained the coveted parcel of tobacco, whose arrival he had alternately craved and dreaded throughout the past ten days.

Zyarulla set it before him with manifest satisfaction.

“Now will my Sahib taste comfort and peace again,” he muttered into the depths of his beard ; and having cut the strings of the parcel, discreetly withdrew.

For a while Lenox merely grasped his recovered treasure, feasting his soul upon the knowledge that here, within the space of one small cube, lay the promise of sleep, peace of mind, oblivion. Then, with unsteady hands, he opened the tin : took from his pocket a briar of great age and greater virtue ; filled it ; lighted it ; and drew in the first mouthful of aromatic fragrance, with such rapture of refreshment as a man, parched with fever, drains a glass held to his lips.

A great peace enfolded him : and no thought of resistance arose to break the enchantment. For the ‘mighty and subtle’ drug kills with kindness. Coming to a tormented man in the guise of an angel of peace, it lures him, lulls him, and wraps him about with false contentment before plunging him into the pit.

While the holiday folk trooped into the long mess-tent, laughing or lamenting over the afternoon's vicissitudes, Lenox sat at his table in shirt and trousers, his pen devouring the loose sheets before him. He bade Zyarulla bring him meat, bread, and a cup of coffee, and deny admittance even to ‘Desmond Sahib’ himself. And throughout the night he worked, and smoked, and finally slept as he had not slept since the Bachelors’ Ball.

Before dawn he was up, and out: a gun on his shoulder, field-glasses slung across his back. He had given orders for a party of beaters to be requisitioned, in his name, from the Rajah's camp; and Zyarulla could be trusted to see to it that he should not starve. All day he tramped and climbed, shot and sketched, to his huge satisfaction: and returning at dusk, repeated his programme of the night before.

His departure without a word of explanation had roused Desmond's anxiety. He suspected a fresh supply of tobacco; and this sudden invisibility confirmed his worst fears. He spoke of them to his wife after breakfast: and for all her radiant hopefulness of heart, she had small consolation to offer him.

The 'week's' events had disappointed her grievously: for the deadlock between man and wife seemed complete.

"Truly, Theo, I don't know what to make of them both," she concluded desperately. "They are the most perverse couple that were ever invented. Benedick and Beatrice were turtle-doves by comparison! After this week I shall give them up in despair."

"Poor darling! They ought to mend their ways, if only out of consideration for you! Come on now and comfort your soul with tilting. I want you to carry all before you in the tournament."

"Do you indeed?" she answered, laughing. "But I shan't hit a single ring to-day. This distracting muddle is getting on my nerves!"

And if Honor Desmond found the strain of sympathetic anxiety ill to endure, what of Quita, whose life's happiness hung upon the issue?

For her the Kajiar Camp, despite its light-comedy atmosphere, had proved a nightmare of surface hilarity, broken rest, and growing distaste for the man whose name she had permitted to be coupled with her own:—all to no purpose, it seemed, save to inflate his self-satisfaction, and fortify his intention, now too clearly manifest, of hindering to the utmost her reunion with her husband.

Moreover, her self-imposed attitude became increasingly hard to maintain. A flash of defiance is one thing: but

sustained defiance, when the heart has unblushingly gone over to the enemy, puts a severe strain upon the nerves.

And what was to be the outcome?

The question stabbed her in the small hours, when ugly possibilities loom large, like figures seen through mist. So strongly had this late love smitten her, that she had been capable of strangling pride, and taking the initiative, had Lenox's bearing given her the smallest hope of success. But unsought surrender, plus the mortification of failure, was more than she felt prepared to risk, even for a chance of winning the one man in all the world:—the man who could at least belong to no other woman, she assured herself with a throb of satisfaction. Thus there seemed no choice left but to go blindly forward along the line of least resistance.

Lenox's non-appearance on Wednesday evening had startled her into fuller knowledge of her dependence on his mere presence to maintain even a mimicry of good spirits: and she heaped contempt upon her own head accordingly. Nevertheless she escaped at an early hour; and lay awake half the night tormenting herself with unanswerable problems.

When breakfast brought no sign of him, she concluded that he must have returned to Dalhousie in disgust: and the conclusion brought her near to the end of her tether. She took refuge in her tent, and, for the first time in many years, sobbed shamelessly, till her eyelids smarted, and her head throbbed and burned. After that she felt better, and her unquenchable courage revived. There is much virtue in your thunder-shower at the psychological moment! She got upon her feet at last; hands pressed against pulsing temples, swaying a little, like a willow that the storm had shaken. But cold water, eau-de-cologne, and the stinging tonic of self-scorn, soon restored her to a semblance of her normal aspect: and by lunch-time she was out again in the mocking sunshine, swept unresisting back into the light-hearted whirl of things.

At tiffin, to her intense relief, Theo Desmond took the empty chair next her own. He had missed her during the morning: and a glance at her face sufficed to give him an

inkling of the truth. All his heart went out to her; and he hastened to answer the question in her eyes.

"Lenox went off at sunrise, for a day's shooting," he remarked conversationally, when they had exchanged greetings.

She lifted her eyebrows. "Did he? Sensible man! I suppose he is tired to death of our frivolous fooling."

"That's rather severe! I can't let you run him down. The other thing's more in his line, that's all; and it'll do him a power of good. He suffers cruelly from want of sleep, poor chap.—By the way, have you heard the latest suggestion for to-morrow?"

"No. I was—lying down this morning. What is it?"

"A burlesque polo match: ladies against men: the men to play on side-saddles by way of a mild handicap! Some of the older folk are a bit horrified at the notion. But I believe it'll come off; and they want me to captain the team."

"You? One of the champions of the Punjab! What impertinence! Shall you?"

"Why, certainly. It will be rather a lark."

"Well, then, I'll play too, if they'll have me. Will you ask them, please?"

He regarded her in frank astonishment. "Jove! I never thought of that. Are you in earnest?"

"But yes. In cut-throat earnest!" she answered, laughing.

"Ever tried your hand at it?"

"Never, in all my days. I will this afternoon though, if you'll take me in hand for an hour or so."

"With all the pleasure in life. You can ride Diamond, if you like. He knows almost as much about the game as I do."

Her eyes sparkled.

"That gem of an Arab? May I, really?" I always thought you were a man in a hundred; and now I know it! That's a bargain, then. Things have been deadly insipid the last two days. But I have something to live for now!"

Garth received her announcement with open dismay. He suspected Desmond's influence: and, in his zeal to

dissuade her, ventured on a mild tone of authority, with disastrous results.

"Well, I shan't have a comfortable moment till the thing is safely over," he concluded unwisely: and she tossed an indignant head.

"Am I such a despicable horseman?" she demanded haughtily. "Captain Desmond doesn't find me so, I assure you."

And indeed, after an hour of assiduous instruction, Desmond had frankly expressed his approval both of her aptness and daring.

When Lenox heard the news on Friday morning, he heartily wished he had decided on a second day's shooting.

Anxiety apart, the knowledge that the woman he loved could thus make a public exhibition of herself for the amusement of a very mixed crowd grated: set the fastidious, old-world temper of the man on edge. For all that he was in his place, well before the appointed time: and from the first crack of polo-stick on ball his eyes never left his wife's flushed face and lightly swaying figure.

The polo ground, occupying the centre of the glade, was ringed about by a crowd as varied and gay in colouring as a bed of mixed tulips in spring. Even the open tent, where the English spectators were gathered, showed a prevailing lightness and brightness of tint. On the farther side of the tent, the Depot band gave out a cheerful blare of sound; and a June sun beamed complacently over all.

For the first twenty minutes the serio-comic game went forward merrily: the women playing in desperate earnest; the men making broad farce out of their ludicrous handicap.

Quita, who had elected to play Diamond first and fourth, was restrained at the outset by the fact that she was handling a priceless pony. But, with the opening of the third *chukkur*, increasing self-confidence, coupled with the pace and keenness of Bathurst's 'Unlimited Loo,' fired her venturesome spirit: and she flung herself

heart and soul into the intoxication of the game; half hoping that some sudden crash and fall might solve the problem of her life by the simple expedient of putting out the light.

More than once Desmond called out an unheeded warning. He saw that pony and rider alike were in danger of losing their heads; and Lenox, leaning forward in an anguish of suspense, followed her every movement with conflicting fury and admiration.

At last the *chukkur* drew to an end.

Away by the farthest goal-posts a fine parody of a scrimmage was in progress, Desmond and Quita being 'on the ball.' The advantage was hers; and she made haste to secure it. Rising in the saddle, she swung her stick for an ambitious back-handed stroke, missed the ball, and smote 'Unlimited Loo,' with the full force of her arm, high up on the off hind-leg.

At this uncalled bolt from the blue, the sensitive animal,—who had never in all his days been chastised by a polo stick for doing his simple duty,—lost his head outright. His first bound snapped the curb chain; and taking the bit between his teeth he bolted across the green as if all the fiends in hell were after him. In vain Quita sat back, and put her whole light weight into her arms. Sheer terror had caught hold of him: and he headed blindly for the ring of natives, who broke away right and left, with shrill cries that gave the finishing touch to his terror.

And now no more than a stretch of shelving turf lay between him and the unfathomed lake. Towards it he fled at an undiminished pace: and Quita, sitting square and steady, with a rushing sound in her ears, foresaw that in less than five minutes her mad hope might be terribly fulfilled. For at the lake's edge the pony must needs swerve sharply, or come to a dead halt: and in either case, at their present rate of speed, she would be flung violently out of the saddle.

Desmond dared not follow, lest he make matters worse.

Maurice sprang up from his seat in the pavilion, and stood transfixed, helpless. "*Nom de Dieu . . . que faire? Elle va mourir!*" he muttered with shaking lips: and

Elsie, child as she was, yearned over him with all the tenderness and pity of inherent motherhood.

Then the tall figure of Lenox broke away from the stunned crowd racing diagonally across the clear stretch between the pony and the lake.

The instant Quita missed her stroke he had risen to his feet; and his intent now was to reach a given spot simultaneously with the pony, and by the force of his added weight on the reins save the situation.

A shout of approval went up from soldiers and natives: and 'Unlimited Loo' fled faster. He passed the point Lenox was making for a bare hand's-length out of reach: but two strides landed him on a treacherous strip of thinly-crusted bog that encircles the lake, and he sank up to his knees in semi-liquid mud.

Quita, breathless and shaken, was jerked out of the saddle, and must have fallen, ignominiously, face downward in her Slough of Despond, but that Lenox,—reaching her in the nick of time—caught and crushed her in his arms.

"You're not hurt. Thank God, you're not hurt," he whispered unsteadily.

With a gasp of amazement that ended in a sob, she leaned her cheek against his coat: and the riotous music of their hearts seemed to fill the universe.

Then reality rushed in, and shattered the dream. For Garth, Maurice, and Bathurst were hurrying towards them.

Quita felt her husband stiffen, and lifted her head.

"Thank you—thank you," she said with a twisted smile. "I think I can stand on my feet now."

In two strides he was clear of the mud, and had set her on firm earth. But she was still clinging to his arm when Garth came up, brimming with concern.

"I'm quite disappointingly all right," she assured him hastily, stung by a keen sense that her catastrophe had fallen headlong from impending tragedy to bathos. "Please bestow all your sympathy on Mr Bathurst, and Unlimited Loo!"

For a second Garth looked up at the man who stood beside her; but only for a second. For in the Scotch-

man's eye hate gleamed like a naked sword ; and Garth had small taste for bared weapons of any kind.

“Ah, mon pauvre Michel !” Quita exclaimed, in a quick rush of tenderness, as her brother half ran to her, white and panting, both hands outstretched : and deserting Lenox, she flew to him, anathematising her own folly in a rapid flow of French. “Take me to my tent now,” she concluded, linking her arm in his. “I still feel idiotically shaky, and I am certainly no loss to my side!—Mr Bathurst”—she turned in Jeff’s direction—“please forgive me. I promise I’ll never ask you to lend me a polo pony again !”

Bathurst,—who had rescued his treasure, and was feeling him all over with skilled hands,—shouted a cheery: “Don’t mention it, Miss Maurice. Always glad to oblige a lady !”

And with a tired smile she turned back to Michael.

“*Viens, mon cher,*” she said gently ; and he led her away.

Conscious of Garth’s eyes on her face, she could not trust herself to look again at Lenox, who had neither moved nor spoken since he set her on dry ground. But that one moment in his arms had solved her problem in a fashion that she dreamed not of: a fashion that still seemed past belief. She knew now that she had never lost him ; and her heart sang a Jubilate Deo all the way to her tent. But she knew also that his pride equalled hers ; that the first move was ‘up to her’ ; and that now, at last, she might make it without fear of rebuff. But how—how ?

Ten minutes later Maurice left her prostrate, in the twilight of her tent ;—eau de cologne on her temples, and a chaos of mixed emotions at her heart.

CHAPTER XII.

“How the world seems made for each of us ;
How all we perceive and know in it
Tends to some moment’s product,—thus,
When the soul declares itself; to wit,
By its fruit : the thing it does.”

—BROWNING.

QUITA lacked courage to appear again in public till the dinner bugle sounded. Garth was her promised partner: and she found him awaiting her just outside her tent.

“My turn now, dear lady,” he said, pressing her finger-tips against his side, as he took her proffered arm. “It has been a blank afternoon for me; but in revenge, I mean to keep you all the evening.”

“You are presumptuous, as always!” she answered with admirable lightness. “Your claim ends with desert.”

“Quite so. But you are generous; and I can trust the rest to you, since you know how much I want it.”

She smiled, as in duty bound. But to-night the man’s facile gallantry revolted her as it had never yet done. She wondered how she had endured it these many months.

The instant they entered the long tent her eyes sought and found the thing they craved: though the sight of Lenox in his accustomed place between the Desmonds reawakened her smouldering jealousy of Honor, and gave the lie to her amazing instant of revelation. But once during the meal she encountered her husband’s eyes. It was as if he had put out a hand and touched her; and her partner’s veiled love-making became a meaningless murmur at her ear. Yet the surface of her brain travelled mechanically along the beaten track of dinner-table talk: and Garth, finding her gentler and more serious than her wont, deemed his hour of triumph very near at hand. Direct encouragement, in the face of his hidden knowledge, had strengthened his conviction that for many weeks she had been stifling her true feelings; that one touch at the right moment would suffice to lift the veil, to bring her at last into his arms. Beyond that moment of mastery he did not choose to look. For

to-night passion had elbowed prudence out of the field. He had claimed her for the evening; and he anticipated great things from the next two hours under the stars.

At these informal camp dinners men and women left the table together: only habitual card-players remaining behind to tempt fortune until the small hours. Quita's hope had been that Desmond might come to her aid. But he had made up a rubber of whist; and to her dismay, she saw Lenox and Honor depart without him. Garth, who also noted their movements, carefully led her round to the far side of a blazing bonfire, piled ten feet high on this last night of Arcadia; and with a suppressed sigh she resigned herself to an evening of comic songs and personalities; and decided that a headache must rescue her, if no other champion were forthcoming.

It was a clear night of stars. The moon had not yet risen; though a herald brightness gave news of her coming. No least whisper of wind stirred the tree-tops. Sun-baked fir branches crackled and snapped like fairy musketry; and many-hued flames,—rose and saffron, heliotrope and sea-green,—played hide-and-seek among them, flinging inverted shadows on faces nearest the blaze.

Human beings break into song round a bonfire as naturally as birds after a shower of rain; and for those who see in such a fire no mere holocaust of dead twigs, but the Red Flower of the Jungle, the symbol and spirit of wild life, this spontaneous minstrelsy has a charm peculiarly its own. A charm of the simplest, certainly; for at camp-fires the banjo reigns supreme; and the aptest songs are those that 'rip your very heartstrings out' and offer fine facilities for effervescing between the verses.

Already a remarkable assortment of these had challenged the winking stars; and Quita was encouraging the requisite headache, while Garth contemplated the suggestion of a stroll towards the lake, when Michael Maurice came up to them.

"Quita, *chérie*, they have sent me to ask if you will sing. I have my fiddle here for accompaniment."

She hesitated. A rare shyness, born of the afternoon's fiasco, was still upon her.

"Who sent you?" she asked, smiling up at him.

"Colonel Mayhew, and several others." He bent lower.

"*Tu es trop fatiguée après ce vilain polo?*"

"*Non, ce n'est pas ça . . . mais . . .*"

"Do, Miss Maurice, please, do," urged an enthusiastic young civilian on her left. "A woman's voice, especially yours, would be a rare treat after our promiscuous shouting."

And on her other side Garth, pressing closer, whispered his plea.

"Don't disappoint me. It is ages since I last heard you sing."

Without answering either, she touched her brother's arm. "Tune up, Michel," she said low and hurriedly. "I have thought of a song."

Garth murmured his thanks with unusual *empressement*. Her instant acquiescence had both moved and flattered him; and his hopes rode high. As a matter of fact, she had not even heard his request. She had simply obeyed an impulse, as in most crises of her life;—an impulse so peremptory that it seemed almost a command from Beyond.

"What song is it to be?" Maurice asked, when the tuning process was complete.

"Swinburne's 'Ask Nothing More.'"

He raised his eyebrows. "A man's song?"

"Yes. But you know I often sing it; and I want to . . . to-night."

"*Qu'y a-t-il, petite sœur?*" he asked, for her manner puzzled him.

"*Rien . . . rien de tout. Commence.*"

And he played the soft chords, pregnant with pleading, that usher in the song.

A moment later, Lenox, leaning back in a canvas chair, sat upright, and took the cigar from his lips.

"A woman singing? Jove—it's Quita!" he added under his breath. Then he remained motionless, straining his eyes for a sight of her between the dancing flames.

Clear and unfaltering her voice soared into the night; and as the song swept on, through pleading to impassioned longing, the whole awakened heart of her took fire from

the poet's faultless phrases ; till, in the last verse, it spoke straightly and simply to her husband, as though they two stood alone in the interstellar spaces of the universe.

“ I who have love, and no more,
Give you but love of you, sweet ;
He that hath more, let him give ;
He that hath wings let him soar.
Mine is the heart at your feet . . .
Here that must love you . . . love you, to live ! ”

The last stupendous chords crashed into silence ; and the fall of a charred twig sounded loud in the pause that followed. Then there came from the shadowy circle of listeners no clatter of hands and voices, but a low disjoined murmur ;—the very attar of applause.

But by that time Quita was making her way blindly through the outskirts of the crowd into the blessed region of darkness and stars.

For, as the last words left her lips, the full apprehension of her act and its possible consequences submerged her in a red-hot wave of shame and self-consciousness ; and before Garth had recovered himself sufficiently to rise and make the request that hovered on his lips, she was gone. For a space he sat still, lost in an amazement that swelled to exultation as the conviction grew in him that at last, after long and laudable repression, her heart had spoken, indirectly, yet unmistakably ; that now, scandal or no scandal, he must make her altogether his.

And while he sat stunned to inaction by the vital issues at stake, Quita hurried on toward the temple, with no purpose in her going save to escape from the consciousness of human presence. She stood still at length, and wrung her hands together.

“ Oh, but it was folly—worse than folly ! He will only think me hateful,—theatrical. He will never understand.”

Yet if, by miraculous chance, he did understand . . . what then ? She held her breath and waited ; till the night seemed alive with voices that laughed her to scorn.

The new-risen moon hung low as if caught and tangled

among the tree-tops of the forest that broke up her golden disc in fantastic fashion. Away there by the bonfire some one else was singing now; a song with a boisterous chorus. Her mad impulse had simply been added to the mass of ineffectual things that form the groundwork of our rare successes.

Suddenly she started, and raised her head. The sound she desired yet dreaded was close at hand. He was coming to her. He must have understood. And because she needed all her courage to face him, she did it at once; for nothing saps courage like hesitation.

Then her heart stood still; a chill aura swept through her and she shivered. The dark figure nearing her was not Lenox. It was Garth.

But that all power of initiative seemed gone from her, she must have turned and fled. Instead she stood her ground, without motion or speech; and he, still misreading her, held out his arms.

"Quita . . . darling . . ." he began, his voice thick with passion.

But her name on his lips roused her like a pistol-shot.

"Go back . . . please go back," she cried imperatively. "I came away because I wanted . . . to be alone."

"But I thought . . ."

"I can't help what you thought! If you have any—respect for me at all, you will do what I ask."

"Of course. Only I shall see you again to-night. I must."

"No . . . no. Not to-night."

"To-morrow then?"

But she had already left him; and for his part, he must needs return the way he came,—frustrated, yet not enlightened; cursing, in no measured terms, the unfathomable ways of women. No doubt she was upset, unstrung by the knowledge of all that her confession implied; and woman-like, showed small regard for his consuming impatience to possess her. But to-morrow he would ride home with her. And after that—the Deluge!

Quita left alone again went forward with lagging feet, and a heart emptied of hope. Her own disappointment crowded out all thought of Garth's unusual behaviour;

till renewed steps behind her suggested the astonishing possibility that he had dared to disregard her request, and followed her, in spite of all. The suggestion roused not fear, but anger, and the militant spirit of independence that circumstances had so fostered in her.

She knew now that she hated him, as we only hate those whom we have wronged. It was intolerable that he should persecute her against her wish ; and she swung round sharply, with words of pitiless truth on her lips.

But the night seemed marked for the unexpected :—and now it was joy incredible that fettered her tongue and her feet, while her husband hastened forward, his face clearly visible in the growing light.

“I followed that fellow when he went after you,” he said bluntly, anger smouldering in his tone. “And I saw him leave you. Did you send him away ?”

“Yes.”

“Why ?”

“I didn’t want him.”

“Does that apply to me also ?”

“No . . . please stay.”

There fell a silence pregnant with things unutterable. Lenox came closer.

“What possessed you to sing that song,—in that way—*Quita* ?”

It was the first time he had spoken her name, and she turned from him, pressing her fingers against flaming cheeks.

“Oh, I am burnt up with shame ! I feel as if I had told all of them.”

“Told them—what ?”

“*Mon Dieu !* Will you compel me to say everything ?”

She flung out both hands, and he caught and crushed them till she winced under the pressure. Then, holding her at arm’s-length, he looked searchingly into her eyes.

And while they stood so—in this their first instant of real union, that dwarfed the years between to a watch in the night—each was aware of the other’s answering heart ; and in each, love burnt with so flame-like a quality that neither speech nor touch was needed to seal the intimacy of contact.

At length he drew her nearer.

"Does it frighten you now when I look right into you?" he asked, an odd vibration in his voice.

"No . . . no. I am only afraid you may not see deep enough."

He drew a great breath.

"Thank God for that. But tell me,—for I am still in the dark,—how on earth has such a miracle come to pass?"

Her low laugh had a ring of inexpressible content.

"Dearest, and blindest! Did it never occur to you that you could not have laid a surer trap to win me than by just keeping clear of me, and living in . . . that Mrs Desmond's pocket?"

He shook his head, smiling down at her. Her old subtle charm with this strange new tenderness superadded, was working like an elixir in his veins.

"But what does the *how* of it matter, after all?" she went on, leaning closer, and speaking low and fervently. "Isn't it enough that I love you with all there is of me . . . Eldred; that I ask you to believe me, and to make me . . . your very wife. There: you *have* compelled me to say everything! Are you satisfied now?"

To such a question he could find no answer in words. But his silence was cardinal. He put an arm round her, straining her close, and with a sigh of sheer rapture she lifted her face to his.

Their eyes met. Then their lips; and Eldred Lenox entered into a knowledge that he dreamed not of. The whole soul of his wife came to him in that kiss; and for a long minute ecstasy held them.

Then he released her, slowly . . . reluctantly.

"Shall we sit out here?" he said. "The whole camp will soon be asleep; but I can't let you go yet."

She sank down, forthwith, upon the grassy slope, in which the fire of a June sun still lingered; and clasping her hands about her knees, looked up at him invitingly. By way of response he stretched himself full length, a little below her, resting on his elbow in such a position as afforded him a clear view of her profile, that gleamed, like a cameo against a background of deodars.

"Smoke," she said softly.

"No. I think not."

His tone had a touch of constraint, and a long silence fell.

The strange solitude about them was no stranger than the enchantment of being alone in it together; and there was that in their hearts that made speech difficult.

They sat looking northward toward the moonlit hollow where the station camp clustered close to the forest's edge. Behind the camp — a mass of unbroken shadow — it climbed up and upward to the mystery of a sky, powdered with the gold-dust of faint stars, on which its jagged outline was printed black as ink. Beyond that again, one majestic snow-peak,—like a stainless soul rising out of a tomb,—gleamed in the light of an increasingly brilliant moon. The crowd round the bonfire had crumbled into a hundred insignificant seeming units; and the fire itself, no longer aspiring to the stars, glowed like an angry eye in the dusky face of the glade.

Presently Quita spoke.

"There is so endlessly much to say, that I don't know where to begin. And after all, I am utterly content just to feel that you are there; that I have really got you back at last."

"You have had me, body and soul, these five years," he answered simply. "It is I who have gained you, by some miracle of your womanhood that I shall never fathom."

"If you set it down to your own manhood, you might be nearer the mark. You are very much too humble, Eldred; and I love you for it,—always did."

"Always?"

"I verily believe so."

"Good God! I never misjudged you, did I? If you . . . cared *then*, why ever did you leave me?"

"Because you gave me no time to take it in. But I am sure now that the germ was there. I think your . . . kisses must have waked it into life. That was why they upset me so. And when I came back, I meant to . . . Oh why should we rake it all up again? It hurts too much."

"But I must know everything now, Quita. You meant to tell me,—was that it?"

"Yes. Though I own it was rather late in the day. Then you sprang it upon me with that letter. I detest the man who wrote it, and I always shall. There was just enough of truth in it, and in your bitter reproaches, to make me feel the hopelessness of lame explanations. Besides, your anger frightened me, though I didn't show it; and I simply acted on a blind impulse to escape from the unknown things ahead; to get back to the love and work I could understand."

"My poor darling! What a blackguard I was to you!"

"Hush! You are not to say that."

"I will. It's true. But . . . didn't you care a great deal for the other chap?"

"I imagined I did. Girls can't always analyse new feelings of that sort. I can see now that it was chiefly mental sympathy between us; on my side at least. But I only discovered that when the real thing came—in a flash."

"When was that?" he asked on a note of eagerness.

"One May morning on the Kajiar road! I knew then that I must have cared always, without guessing it. But your coolness roused my pride; and I vowed that if you had wiped me out of your heart, I would die sooner than let you suspect my discovery. Yet all the while I longed for you to know it; and in the end, goaded by your blindness, and your astonishing want of conceit, I break my pride into a hundred little bits. *Ai-je été assez femme?*" she concluded with a whimsical smile.

One of her hands lay on the grass beside him. He covered it with his own.

"And was the amazing discovery responsible for the Garth episode?" His tone had a hint of anxiety.

"For the latter part of it, yes; though we have been friends all the winter. He is at least moderately intelligent; and an intelligent egoist is always interesting. Besides, companionship is the breath of life to me, you understand; and I seldom manage to make friends with women."

"The other kind of friendship is an edged tool."

"And therefore irresistible ! It's like fencing with the buttons off the foils."

"You speak from much practical experience ?"

"Yes. I have had my share of it. But please believe me, Eldred,"—she hesitated,—"I have been as loyal to you in word and deed, all these years, as if I had borne your name, and lived under your roof. In spite of my weakness for edged tools, I have never let any man tell me that he loved me since you told me so yourself, in the dark ages. And if a few have wanted to do so, I could hardly help that, could I ?"

"No more than you could help breathing or sleeping," he answered with a slow strong pressure of her hand.

"I know I ought not to have let Major Garth see so much of me after I saw how it was with him, but—since it's the whole truth to-night—I confess your aloofness hurt me so, that I wanted to see if I could rouse you to a spark of feeling by hurting you back, and I chose the weapon readiest to my hand."

"You struck deep with it. Does the knowledge give you any satisfaction ?"

"It fills my cup of shame to overflowing. Yet,—come to think of things, you did much the same without realising it."

"Which makes a vast difference, surely ?"

"Not to me, *mon ami*. It is only God who judges by the intention ; possibly because He never suffers from the action."

"Quita ! That's irreverent !"

"Is it ? I'm sorry if it sets your Scottish prickles on end ! Are you . . . a very religious man, Eldred ?"

"I believe in God," he answered simply.

A short silence followed the statement. Then Quita spoke.

"But you see, don't you, dear man, that I spoke truth. My pain was none the less sharp because you inflicted it unwittingly. It's one of the things people are apt to forget."

"Your pain ? Before God I never dreamed that any act of mine could give you a minute's uneasiness ; though Mrs Desmond . . ."

"Don't begin about Mrs Desmond, please!" She drew her hand away with a touch of impatience. "She is everything that is perfect, of course. But I hate her; and I believe I always shall."

Lenox turned on his elbow and looked up into her face.

"My dear . . . I can't let you speak so of my best friend. We owe her everything, you and I. You shall hear about it all one of these days. And apart from that, she is . . ."

"Yes, yes. I can see what she is, clearly enough. A superbly beautiful woman, outside and in, who possesses a good deal of influence over you. I can be just to her, you see, if I am . . . jealous."

"Jealous? Nonsense. The word is an insult to her, and to me."

She reddened under the reproof in his tone.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean it so. I am only afraid that after close intimacy with her you will find—your wife rather a poor thing by comparison. Just the 'eternal feminine' with all an artist's egoism, and more than the full complement of faults."

She spoke so simply, and with such transparent sincerity, that again he turned on her abruptly; his smouldering passion quickened to a flame.

"Quita . . . you dear woman . . . if I could only make you realise . . .!"

But long repression, and the knowledge that was poisoning his perfect hour, constrained him to reticence. He dared not let himself go.

"I think I do realise . . . now . . ." she whispered, stirred to the depths by the repressed intensity of his tone.

"Then don't belittle yourself any more. I forbid it. You understand?"

Again he heard the low laugh on which her soul seemed to ride. Then, leaning impulsively down to him, she put her bare arms round his shoulders from behind, and rested her cheek upon his hair.

The man held his breath, and remained very still, as if fearful lest word or movement should break the spell.

After five years of unloved loneliness, this first spontaneous caress from his wife, with its delicate suggestion of intimacy, seemed to break down invisible barriers and set new life coursing in his veins.

"You forbid it?" she echoed, on a tremulous note of happiness. "And you have the right to. You, and no one else in all the world! You laughed at me in the old days—do you remember?—for clutching at my independence. Well, I have had my surfeit of it now; and I am desperately tired of standing alone . . . darling."

She paused before the unfamiliar word, unconsciously accentuating its effect, and Lenox, taking her two hands in one of his own, kissed them fervently. The moment he dreaded was upon him, and in the face of her impassioned tenderness he scarcely knew how to meet it.

"You should not stand alone one minute longer, if I could have my will," he said in a repressed voice.

She lifted her head and looked at him.

"And why can't you have your will? What are we going to do about it, Eldred?"

"Nothing in a hurry," he answered slowly. "We paid too dearly for that last time."

"But, *mon cher* . . . we have waited five whole years."

"That is just the difficulty. Five years of overwork and bitterness of spirit are not to be wiped out in a single hour; even such an hour as this. The man you married had not gone through the fire, and been badly burned in the process."

He paused. The irony of their reversed positions stung him to the quick, and she sat watching his face. The pallor of moonlight intensified its ruggedness, its deep indentations of cheek and brow. She began to be aware that the dropped stitches of life cannot always be picked up again at will; that there is no tyrant more pitiless than the Past; and a vague dread took hold of her, sealing her lips.

"We have got to look facts in the face to-night," Lenox went on with the doggedness of his race. "I'm a poor hand at discussing myself. It's an unprofitable subject. But I can't let you rush headlong into a reunion that may prove disastrous . . . for you. To-night's revela-

tion has astounded me. It isn't easy to get one's bearings all at once ; but before we take any further irretrievable step I am bound, in conscience, to tell you how the land lies. When you—repudiated me, I accepted your decision as final. I never dreamed of your coming back ; and I acted accordingly. I took to work as I might have taken to drink, if I had been made that way ; with the natural result that I . . . smoked a great deal too much, and slept too little. I saw no earthly reason to husband my strength, or my life ; and in consequence, I have gained something of a reputation for tackling dangerous and difficult jobs. There's plenty more work of the kind ahead, with the forward policy in full swing ; and one can't go back on all that has been done. You see that, don't you ?"

"Yes. But couldn't I ever go with you ?"

He smiled. "I believe you have grit enough ! But it would be unheard of. Besides . . . there is another trouble, and a very serious one, blocking the way."

"You will tell me what it is ?"

He did not answer at once. To blacken himself deliberately in the eyes of the woman he loves is no light ordeal for a man ; and Lenox shrank from it with the peculiar sensitiveness of a nature at once humble and proud ; the more so since to-night had brought home to him the heart-breaking truth that in "the devil's wedlock of evil and pain" one can never suffer alone.

But a great love had been given him, and a force stronger than his will impelled him to speak truth, even at the cost of losing it.

"Yes . . . I will tell you what it is," he said slowly, looking straight before him. "You have the right to know."

And in a few blunt words, unsoftened by excuse or justification, he told her, not the fact only, but his dread of its far-reaching effect.

"And it seems plain as daylight to me," he added bitterly, "that a man so cursed has no right to multiply misery by taking a woman into his life. That was the real reason why I kept clear of you latterly, and tried to thank God that you did not care."

He could not trust himself to look round at her face, but he felt her lean close to him again. For the unobtrusive strength of the man stood revealed in his confession; and it is woman's second nature to admire strength.

"Eldred, . . . my husband," she breathed, her voice breaking on the word. "How cruelly you must have suffered! And it was all *my* fault."

There spoke the woman!—intent upon the individual; blind—wilfully or otherwise—to the larger issues involved.

"It was *not* your fault," he answered with smothered vehemence. "And in any case, don't you see, it's no question of blame, but of consequences. And we dare not shut our eyes to them. For this business of marriage is a complicated affair. What's more, I believe the wrench of immediate separation, with the comparative freedom it involves, would come less hard on you in the long-run, than actual marriage with a man of my stamp.—Oh, you would find me a sorry bargain all round, I assure you," he concluded with a short, hard laugh. "And you will do well to think twice before you burn your boats for me!"

She slid lower down the slope, and laid one hand on his knee.

"I don't choose to think twice; and I *have* burnt my boats as it is! Besides . . . you will be strong to conquer your trouble, now you know that all my happiness depends upon it." She paused for an appreciable moment. "We seem to have changed places since that long-ago morning, Eldred. It is I who want—to begin now—on any terms."

He put out his arm, and drew her very close to him.

"Reckless as ever!" he chided without severity. "You dismissed me on an impulse; and now you would take me back again with the same stupendous disregard for results. It is very evident you need some one to look after you, and teach you common-sense."

"I have told you already *who* it is that I need. Isn't that enough?"

The thrill in her low tone set all the man in him on fire. The influence of the hour was strong upon him.

"My God!" he muttered under his breath. "How can mere flesh and blood hold out against you?"

"Must you hold out against me—even after what I said?"

She nestled nearer, and stray tendrils of hair softly brushed his cheek. His lips whitened, but he set them close. Her touch, the perfume of her passion, had their exalting effect on him. Her weakness challenged his strength.

"Yes; I must," he answered quietly. "For your sake, my dear, and for my own self-respect. I am fighting this thing, you understand, with every weapon at my command. And until I see my way clear out on the other side, I will not—I dare not—take you back. Now come. It is high time you were asleep. We can't stay out here together all night."

"We have every right to . . . if we choose," she murmured, still rebellious.

"You forget, I am to teach you common-sense! There is to-morrow to be thought of, and your long ride back to Dalhousie."

A small shiver ran through her.

"I am afraid of to-morrow. I shall wake up and feel as if all this had been a dream. When shall I see you again . . . alone?"

"I will come up and call on you the day after!" he said, assuming a deliberate lightness in sheer self-defence. "Don't let me find Garth there, though; or I warn you I shall not be accountable for my behaviour!"

He rose on the words, and lifted her to her feet. They descended the slope in silence, walking a little apart, as if accentuating the fact that their reunion in this June night of enchantment and faint stars was an incomplete thing after all.

The moon was near her zenith; and, outside the formless dark of the forest, the great glade held her radiance as a goblet holds wine. Past the half-hidden temple of the holy lake they moved leisurely towards the cluster of tents that showed like a pallid excrescence at the forest's edge. To-night again, as on that earlier unforgettable day, they seemed the only living beings in a world of

shadows and folded wings ; and the decree of separation, coming at such a moment, put a severe strain on their self-control.

Fifty feet from Quita's tent they stood still.

She held out her hands. He pressed them closely between his own, that were strangely cold, and lifted them to his lips. Then she swayed forward unsteadily ; and in an instant her face was hidden against his shoulder, her whole frame shaken with soundless sobs.

A woman in tears sets even a case-hardened man at a disadvantage ; and Lenox, confronted with the phenomenon for the first time in his life, experienced a sense of helpless bewilderment, coupled with a vague conviction of his own brutality in having brought this happy-hearted wife of his to such a pass. He could not guess that after a week of ceaseless tension, played out with no little fortitude, this moment of unrestraint came as a pure relief to her overwrought nerves ; a relief that verged upon ecstasy, since her husband's arm was round her, his hand mechanically stroking her hair.

"Hold up, hold up," he urged her gently. "This sort of thing will never do."

But control, once lost, is ill to regain. His words produced no visible effect, for in her momentary abandonment, she could not see his face ; or guess at the struggle that was enacting behind its curtain of self-mastery. And now, to discomfiture was added an overpowering temptation to trample on all scruples of conscience ; to take that which was his, without further let or hindrance ; and put an end to their distracting situation once for all.

"Quita, . . . my darling wife . . .!" he broke out desperately. "For Heaven's sake pull yourself together. You are torturing me past endurance. Do you suppose it is an easy thing . . . to let you go ?"

She raised her head at that, compressing her lips to still their tremor.

"Forgive me, . . . dearest. It was stupid of me to make a fuss. I will go now ; and I promise not to behave like this again."

She deliberately drew his head down to her own ; and they kissed, once. Then she left him, something hur-

riedly ; and he stood transfixed looking after her, till the falling flap of the tent hid her from view.

There could be no thought of sleep for Eldred Lenox that night.

Till the moon slipped behind the pines, and the sentinel snow-peak in the North caught, and flung back, the first glimmer of dawn, he paced the empty glade from end to end. His mouth and throat were parched. His every nerve clamoured for the accustomed narcotic. But pipe and tobacco - pouch reposed in his breast - pocket — untouched.

CHAPTER XIII.

“ Ah, Love, but a day,
And the world has changed ! ”

—BROWNING.

AN early return journey had been advocated by all experienced weather prophets of the mushroom colony of Kajiar. The great monsoon was already rolling up from the coast-line, and at any moment might break in thunder over the hills.

By eight of the morning tent-poles were swaying and falling on all sides : and the wide glade that had slept in silver when Quita parted from her husband, was astir from end to end. From every corner came the brisk insistent tapping of hammers on tent-pegs ; the shrill neighing of ponies, and shriller chatter of coolies, bargaining for payment in advance ; repudiating loads a few ounces overweight, and tragically prophesying death on the road if the illegal incubus were not removed.

Peremptory bugle-notes rang out upon the air ; and mounted Englishmen, galloping hither and thither, scattered commands right and left in a series of deep-chested shouts.

Striking camp,—breaking up ! It is the key - note of

Anglo-Indian life. 'The chord of change unchanging' sounds unceasingly in travel-weary ears.

But experience breeds proficiency; and the native servant is an adept in the art of so oiling the wheels that his master shall accomplish his appointed pilgrimage with the least possible damage to his much-tried nervous system.

Zyarulla, the indomitable, was a man of this order. In his opinion the Sahib had no concern whatever with the minor details of the march: an opinion with which the Sahib in question had not the smallest desire to quarrel. And on this particular morning Lenox had little attention to spare even for the sorting and bestowal of his priceless manuscripts,—so impatient was he to verify the dream-like happenings of the night; to look into his wife's eyes and feel the answering pressure of her hand. Swallowing a hasty cup of tea and a banana while he dressed, he hastened out to the place of their parting seven hours earlier.

Afar off he caught sight of her, standing, in habit and *terai*, on the open space where her tent had been, supervising the departure of her last load of luggage, and listening patiently to tales of coolie villainy and extortion poured forth by her Kashmiri ayah, on a high note of vituperation.

He checked his advance for the pure pleasure of watching her from a distance: and when the ayah,—denouncing as she ran,—hurried off in the wake of her refractory army, he went briskly forward and held out his hand.

She gave him her own without a word, and for a full minute of time they stood thus, hands and eyes interlocked, oblivious of the noisy world about them, which, happily for them, was absorbed in matters of far greater moment.

"Can't I help you?" Lenox asked; and the simple question, with all that it implied of his renewed right of service, thrilled her like a caress.

"I wish you could. But I've got through most of it already."

"That's bad luck. Maurice not much use on these occasions, I suppose?"

"Not the smallest use, bless him! He says I have more talent for it than he! But call him Michael, *cher ami*, only to me."

"Michael then, by all means—Quita.—You can't think what it is to me to be able to call you by your name again," he added with sudden fervour.

She laughed and blushed deliciously.

"I noticed that you never called me by—the other one," she said, looking intently at a distant tree.

"Good Lord, no—I'd have bitten my tongue out sooner!"

He could not keep his eyes from her face; and as the blush died down its pallor smote him.

"Did you sleep at all?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes; for an hour or two. Did you?"

"Didn't even lie down."

"Oh, *mon pauvre*—!"

"Hush!—Don't trouble your dear head about that."

"But I must. It breaks my heart—"

He laughed. "That's worse than ever! You've got to keep your heart intact—for me."

His eyes travelled from her face to her unadorned left hand. Hers followed them; and a half smile parted her lips.

"Where d'you keep them?" he asked under his breath.

Still smiling, she unfastened two buttons of her habit and vouchsafed him a glimpse of gold and diamonds. "They live on a chain—in there," she explained softly.

"You have worn them, then, after a fashion?"

"Yes: since I learnt to love—my bondage!"

"Did you really never wish that I might be conveniently wiped out, even in the early days?"

"No, never:—and I am thankful now that I *can* say 'No' with perfect truth."

She drew in a long breath of ecstasy. The morning cheerfulness of the world at large, the music of her own pulses, and of the man's voice, vibrant with things inexpressible, filled her with a very oppression of happiness.

"Oh, Eldred," she breathed. "It still feels like a dream. Let's talk sheer prose just to make it feel real!—Are you and the Desmonds riding back with Colonel and Miss Mayhew?"

“Yes.”

“So are we.”

“And Garth?”

“I suppose so. But I want *you* to ride with me. Will you—darling?”

She added the entreaty of her eyes to the last word, and he hesitated.

“It will look a little odd, and sudden, of course. But I don’t see why I shouldn’t.”

“Nor do I. We can at least begin our courtship—can’t we?—to prepare people for what is to come! Besides—if it isn’t you, it will be Major Garth; and . . . I’m a little afraid of him after last night.”

“Why? What the devil did he do?”

“Nothing—nothing definite. He only spoke rather strangely before I sent him away; and I don’t want to be alone with him, if I can help it. You see, he . . . he cares for me, Eldred; and I am afraid he thinks now that I—care for him. Oh, I feel contemptuously wicked! But I have been rather desperate this week, all on account of *you*; and I really think it’s your business to protect me from the consequences!”

“Of course it is my business, and my privilege to protect you,” he answered fervently. Her confession of dependence was sweeter to him than honey in the honeycomb. “But you gave me an almighty snubbing the other day when I made a clumsy attempt at it.”

“Make allowances, *mon cher*, and don’t fail me now.”

“Fail you?” He flashed a reproachful glance at her. “I hope I may never do that, while there’s breath in my body! Trust me to be at your right hand when we start. Mrs Desmond will have wit enough to capture—your friend, if she sees that I want you.”

“Why? Does she know all about it?”

“Just the bare facts. I told her myself.”

“And he?”

“Certainly. They are one, those two, if ever man and woman achieved the miracle.”

“Does that account for his flattering attentions to me since Chumba?”

“Quite possibly.”

"But that wasn't fair play! He is such a grand fellow; and I was so proud of my small conquest!"

Her lighter mood was even more irresistible than her seriousness had been: but Lenox pulled himself together.

"Tell him so, and you'll make your conquest at once, if you've not made it already! Hullo—there is the last breakfast bugle. Shall we go in together? If I am doomed to fall in love with you, I may as well set about it at once!"

Her answering look set a crown on him.

"Ah, my dear," she whispered. "In spite of all you said last night, I am happy beyond words."

"So am I," he answered simply. "Come."

From her own area of luggage-strewn ground, Honor Desmond,—carrying little Paul, whom she had insisted on bringing into camp,—looked after them as they went, her glad heart in her eyes; and Desmond, coming up from behind, took her lightly by the arm.

"Well, old lady," he asked. "Are you satisfied yet?"

"Abundantly."

"And am I to get my wife back again as a reward for distinguished services rendered?"

"I imagine so!" she answered, laughing happily. "Unless you would rather keep your grievance!—Now go on to breakfast, darling; and I'll follow when I have packed this priceless person into his dandy. Whatever happens, he and Parbutti must run no risk of getting drenched."

Breakfast was half through before Garth sauntered into the mess-tent: and Honor, who had watched for his coming, felt an unbidden pang of pity at sight of his blank face, when he beheld Quita sitting beside her husband, a bright spot of colour in either cheek, her eyes radiating a light that refused to be hidden under a bushel.

The unexpected blow roused all the devil in him. Man of prudence though he was, he could have murdered Lenox at that moment. But life rarely lends itself to melodrama: and instead he sat down at the far end of the table; and, for once in his life, ate a meal without being aware of its quality. His brain was busy reviewing

the events of the previous day; putting two and two together, and trying not to see that they made four. A physical chill took him as he realised how narrowly he had escaped the ignominy of betraying the fact that he had counted on the consent of this proudest among women to the only proposals possible in the circumstances.

It was an awkward corner for James Garth; and in his chequered experience of awkward corners the *rôle* of victim had rarely been his. Even the witness of his eyes did not carry conviction. By some means he must contrive to ride home with her, and learn from her lips the 'wherefore' of this astonishing change of front. He reflected that Lenox had little *finesse*, and anticipated small trouble in circumventing him.

But he reckoned without Honor Desmond, whose strategical skill came to her from a long line of distinguished soldiers, and whose sympathies had been touched to the quick by the grave contentment in Eldred Lenox's eyes when they lingered on his wife's face and figure.

Breakfast over, she accosted Garth straightway with a cheerful morning greeting: and from that moment, to the time of their departure, she took charge of him, gently yet irresistibly; keeping him well away from Quita's neighbourhood; and so isolating him that he could not desert her without open rudeness: proceedings that at once mystified and flattered him, as Honor herself was delightedly aware.

For a full hour the exodus of man and beast went noisily forward. But Colonel Mayhew's departure was delayed by his desire to see the Chumba contingent well under weigh before leaving: and by the time he announced his readiness to start, the last remaining units of the Great Camp were out of sight, trotting briskly along the shadowed road that winds up through the forest to Bukrota Mall.

"If we push along briskly we may get in with dry skins yet," he said, scanning the sky, where a vanguard of tattered cloud trailed aimlessly across the blue.

"And I was actually hoping we might get caught!" Quita

confessed on a mock note of apology. "It would make such a thrilling *finale*: and I delight in your Indian storms."

Colonel Mayhew laughed and shook his head.

"When you have seen and heard as many of them as I have, Miss Maurice, you will simply find them 'demnition damp and disagreeable,' like Mantalini's dead body! And even at the risk of disappointing you, I intend to make a bolt for it.—Come on, my contingent!"

Lenox was at his wife's right hand, as he had promised: and Garth had so far succumbed as to lift Mrs Desmond into her saddle.

"You are a practised hand at it!" she said, smiling down upon his obvious annoyance at the fate in store for him. "Why shouldn't you and I head the contingent? Some one must go first!"

There was nothing for it but to acquiesce; and to endure, as best he might, the torment of Quita's clear tones close behind, alternating with her husband's bass; both voices pitched too low to be articulate. Desmond followed with Mayhew, while Maurice and Elsie, and the customary string of coolies, brought up the rear.

For the first few miles splashes of sunlight gleamed and quivered on the rough pathway, on red-pine stems, and moss-coated rocks. But before half their journey was accomplished, it became evident that they were not to escape the opening storm of the great monsoon.

A shuddering wind set the dense pines above and below them swaying and moaning, a sound of strange and infinite melancholy. The sunlight went out like a snuffed candle; battalions of clouds, charged with electricity, rolled silently northward, obliterating all things; and an ochreous twilight settled down upon the forest. Save for the whispering of wind-tossed trees, all Nature seemed hushed, expectant, holding her breath.

The dusky stillness wrought upon the nerves of the riders, producing a vague, uncomfortable sense of foreboding. Talk grew fitful; and was instinctively carried on in lowered tones.

"Push on a bit faster, Mrs Desmond. It would be as well to get out where the trees are thinner before the worst is upon us."

Colonel Mayhew's voice had an anxious note. He had weathered the opening storm of many monsoons; but his daughter's presence wakened in him a new fear of the thunderbolts of the gods.

Even as he spoke, a phosphorescent gleam sped through the trees, like a passing soul; and a threatening growl rumbled up from the South. It was the prelude. Two minutes later, rocks, stems, branches, and the minutest fir-needles that flickered against the grey, showed like ink-strokes on tarnished silver as a forked flash leaped, quivering, from the heart of a blue-black cloud. The report that followed, after scarce five seconds of stillness, was smart, crisp, short as a revolver-shot; and long before a hundred peaks had made an end of flinging back the sound, a second flash and crash—in swifter succession—smote the eyes and ears of the riders, who now urged their horses to a canter, *saises*, coolies, and three devoted dogs panting zealously behind them.

Their hope was to gain shelter in the Government woodsheds, two miles ahead, before the inevitable down-pour came to drench their bodies and impede their progress. But Fate was in a merciless mood on that June morning.

The third flash split up the sky as a stone splits a window pane. Pulsating streaks of fire, red, green, and blue, radiated in all directions, half-blinding them with the brazen glare. And before it faded, a crackling detonation seemed to rip the very heavens from marge to marge.

As yet no rain had fallen: and for ten deafening minutes the little party rode in silence through an inferno of reiterate light and sound. Once or twice Quita glanced at her husband, cantering beside her, and wondered vaguely when she would hear him speak again; wondered, too, at her own matter-of-fact acceptance of that which a week ago had appeared impossible. But the storm stunned heart and brain, as well as eye and ear. Everything human,—life, death, love itself,—seemed trivial in face of this stupendous battle of the elements. Above them, and on all sides of them, the lightning leaped and darted, like a live thing seeking its prey. It was as if the sombre heavens were bringing forth brood upon

brood of fiery serpents, and greeting the birth of each with ear-splitting peals of Titanic laughter.

Then came the rain:—not in mere drops, but in a solid sheet of water, blinding, drenching, stupefying. At the same instant the fury of the storm culminated in a blaze of white light that seemed to spring upon them from all sides at once, with a shout as of fiends let loose; and, through the echoing after-roll of thunder, came a sharper, harsher sound,—the death note of a mighty tree.

Lenox and his wife faced one another involuntarily with startled looks.

“How appalling!—What was it?” she asked between two breaths.

“A pine struck somewhere up the *khud*. Not frightened, are you, lass?” he added with tender concern. “It’s the very thing you wanted. You’ve got your thrilling finale with a vengeance!”

A clatter of breaking branches made him look up. “Great God!” he cried, on a note of alarm. “Back your pony sharp. It’s coming down on the top of us!”

And as she obeyed, with the swift instinct of fear, Desmond’s voice reached him through the rush of the rain.

“Look out for yourself, Lenox! She’s safe enough.”

But before the words were out, the upper half of a great deodar crashed down upon the narrow path, and a long branch struck the Galloway’s shoulder with tremendous force. For an instant Shaitan staggered under the blow:—then horse, and man, and tree were hurled headlong down the steep, rain-lashed ravine.

A great cry broke from Quita: and in that cry, and the white, rigid repression that followed it, Garth had his answer to the question he had never asked.

For the hundredth part of a second all seven sat paralysed by the hideous thing that had happened before their eyes, and by the hopeless nature of the drop down which Lenox had disappeared:—wiped out, as though he had never been.

Then Desmond’s practical vigour asserted itself, and he sprang lightly to the ground.

“Here, take hold of the Demon, some one!”

And it was Quita who leant forward and grasped the bridle with a steady hand. Her action gave him the chance he wanted of getting close enough to speak a few words of encouragement in a hurried undertone.

“Don’t lose heart. It’s an ugly drop. But he fell clear of the tree; and these *khuds* are the most chancy things imaginable. I’m off after him, as fast as hands and feet can take me.”

Speech was beyond her; but she thanked him with her eyes.

A moment later he was kneeling in the mud, rapidly unfastening boots and gaiters; for one downward glance had convinced him that it would be a matter of climbing, and difficult climbing at that.

By now Colonel Mayhew had dismounted also: and as Desmond stood upright—in socks and breeches—and flung aside his dripping helmet, the older man drew him to the path’s edge.

“Look here, my dear chap,” he said, when they were out of earshot of the group, who sat spellbound in the grip of tragedy, “are you justified in running a serious risk, probably—to no purpose? For I’m afraid poor Lenox hasn’t a ghost of a chance. You’re a married man, remember; and it looks to me uncommonly like madness to attempt that *khud* in such weather. It’ll be a case of holding on with your eyelids; and there’s a coolie track not far from here, that leads down to the valley.”

Desmond’s mouth took the dogged line that his *sowars* knew and loved; and a combatant light flashed in his eyes.

“Your blood’s cooler than mine, sir,” he answered quietly. “But I have a fairly steady head; and my wife would be the last person in the world to hold me back, thank God. In such cases five or ten minutes may mean just the difference between life . . . and death. If you will get together some sort of a stretcher—a good strong one—and come on post-haste down the coolie track, I’ll be grateful. I suppose we haven’t a drop of brandy among us?—bad luck to it!”

“There’s a provision *kilter* on one of the coolies. Shall we have it turned out, on the chance?”

"Good Lord, yes. Get it done at once, please." Then he turned to Garth. "I say, Major, gallop on, will you, and catch up Dr O'Malley. I saw him start with the last contingent. They can't be more than two miles ahead."

And as Garth obeyed the peremptory request, the devil himself must have whispered to his heart the despicable suggestion that possibly Fate had struck a blow in his favour after all.

Colonel Mayhew, meanwhile, rummaging feverishly in the depths of the *kilter* with scant hope of success, besprewed the wet earth on all sides of him with canned fruits, sardines, greasy jharrons, and crumpled wads of newspaper: till at length, like Hope out of Pandora's casket, there came forth from an unsuspecting-looking bundle of clothes half a bottle of brandy, stowed carefully away by the kitmutgar, for private ends best known to himself.

Desmond, who stood by fuming with impatience to be gone, laid eager hands on it.

"Lord, what a miracle! Pity there's no flask handy," he muttered, buttoning his coat, and thrusting the unwieldly impediment into a side-pocket. Then, catching sight of a horn tumbler among the *débris*, he picked it up, and drew out the bottle.

"Better leave you some for the women,—if you can get 'em to drink it diluted with a trifle of rain!—There now, I'm off. For God's sake, Colonel, look sharp after me."

Without waiting for an answer, he swung round on his heel, and for the first time looked at his wife, whose eyes had never left him since he sprang from the saddle. Now, as his own challenged them, they gave him in full the approval he craved; and, for the space of a few seconds, their spirits clung together in an embrace more intimate than any communion of the lips.

Then Theo Desmond wrenched himself away.

Stepping deliberately backward, over a short, sheer drop, he let himself down by his hands on to a tumbled mass of boulders, and began his perilous descent in earnest. Whereupon Brutus,—who stood at the *khud*'s edge peering into space, ears and tail dumbly demanding explanation,—lunged forward, as if to follow so practical

a lead; and only Colonel Mayhew's prompt clutch at his collar saved him from joining the master who had so basely deserted him. Both he and Desmond's distracted Aberdeen were handed over to a *sais*; and after much ineffectual choking and gurgling, subsided into apathetic despair.

Already half a dozen natives were busy devising an impromptu stretcher from fir branches, ropes, and strips of coolie blanket,—drenched and evil-smelling, yet acceptable enough; while Quita sat watching its construction in a dazed stillness; her eyes dry and wide; her artist's brain picturing too vividly that which lay awaiting it down there in the pitiless rain, that seemed to add a refinement of cruelty to the horse-play of lightning and thunder.

But Colonel Mayhew, unaware of the morning's double tragedy, had eyes only for his daughter; and, in his first free moment, hurried to her side. She had hidden her face, and was crying softly, to Michael's open dismay. Once or twice he had even laid a hand on her, unheeded, and unrebuked. But her father's touch roused her, and she took convulsive hold of him. She was still little more than a child; and this was her first face-to-face encounter with the brutality of God's universe.

"Don't upset yourself, girlie," he said kindly. "The damage may be less than we think for. I must stay here and help; but you must be a good child, and ride on at once. You'll see her safe home for me, won't you, Maurice?"

Michael acquiesced eagerly. Unrelieved tragedy upset his nerves. He longed to escape from the consciousness of Quita's dumb despair: and when Elsie had been induced to swallow a drop of brandy that would not have warmed a sparrow, they rode off briskly through the sullen downpour.

With a breath of relief, Colonel Mayhew went up to Honor Desmond, who had just dismounted.

"What's that for?" he asked anxiously. "You and Miss Maurice are going on too, of course."

Honor shook her head.

"But you can do no earthly good by waiting. We

may be an hour or more before we get up here again. It will be slow work, if . . . if Lenox is alive ;—and you will be drenched to the skin."

"There are worse evils than that!" she answered with gentle immobility. "Don't trouble about me, please. I *must* stay here till I know what has happened ; and I think Miss Maurice will wish to stay too. We shall come to no harm. We women have nine lives, you know!"

"And if you will—you will. . . . I know that also ! But at least take a nip to keep out the damp. Your husband gave me this at the last moment for the three of you."

"How like him to think of it!" she murmured, smiling unsteadily.

"Yes—it *was* like him,"—and in the expansion of the moment the warm-hearted Resident put a fatherly hand on her shoulder. "He's a deuced fine fellow, my dear, and he has found a wife that's worthy of him."

Honor blushed rose-red, and took the proffered stimulant.

"I'll give Miss Maurice some too," she said. "Don't lose a second on our account, please."

Thus urged, the good man hurried away ; and Honor went straight to Quita, whose unnatural apathy cut her to the heart.

"Miss Maurice, here's brandy," she said softly. "Drink all of it, before I help you down."

Quita emptied the tumbler ; and Honor, grasping her waist with both hands, lifted her out of the saddle.

"How strong you are," she said, in the toneless voice of a sleep-walker. Then her frozen anguish melted suddenly and completely. For Honor Desmond, instead of releasing her, clasped her close, kissing her, with passionate tenderness, on cheeks and brows, like wet marble : and in the midst of her bewildered misery Quita realised dimly what it might mean to possess a mother.

"Theo and I know about it all," Honor explained at length ; and Quita nodded. The fact that she was crying her heart out on the shoulder of her detested rival made the whole incident dreamlike to the verge of stupefaction : and it was Honor who spoke again.

"We'll just wait here together till they come back; and shut—the worst out of our thoughts. You have splendid courage, my dear, and I think I love nothing in the world more than courage. Sit down with me now on this pile of fir-needles. It looks a little less saturated than the rest of the world."

Still keeping an arm round her, she drew her down unresisting to her side: and Quita, choking back the tears that had probably saved her brain from after-effects of the shock, looked with awakened interest at her new-found friend.

"I don't deserve that you should be so good to me," she said, humour flashing through her pain like a watery sunbeam on a day of mist. "I have hated you, with all my heart, ever since I first saw you!"

At which confession Honor pressed her closer. "Bless you for telling me!—I take it simply as the measure of—your love for him."

"*Mon Dieu*, no! Not now," she answered very low.

"I am glad of that too. For I want very much to be good friends with Captain Lenox's wife."

On the last word a slow colour crept back into Quita's cheeks.

"You mustn't speak of it—yet, to any one else. There are difficulties—big difficulties . . ."

"I know;—but you may trust him to conquer them. One feels in him the sort of force that moves mountains."

Again Quita nodded. "You seem to know everything," she added, a last spark flickering in the ashes of her jealousy. "And I suppose you blame *me* for it all."

"I am too ignorant of the facts to blame either of you. I only know that even if he wronged you in any way, he has been more than sufficiently punished."

At that Quita's lips quivered, and the storm of her grief broke out afresh: while the greater storm overhead, having accomplished its evil work, rolled rapidly northward, with the colossal unconcern of a giant who crushes a beetle in his path; and the first stupendous downrush of water subsided into a melancholy drizzle of rain.

In that endless hour of looking and waiting for those who seemed as if they had been blotted out for all time,

Quita learned once and for all what manner of woman Honor Desmond was ; learnt also something of the loyalty and reserve that had marked Eldred's intercourse with her whom he had spoken of as his best friend.

CHAPTER XIV.

*“ And echo circles in the air,
Is this the end—is this the end ? ”*

—TENNYSON.

Down,—steadily, interminably down the face of that formidable ravine, Theo Desmond slid, and scrambled, and climbed ; holding his mind rigidly on the practical necessities of the moment, which were many and disconcerting. His stockinginged feet showed dull-red streaks and blotches, where sharp stones had cut them. His hands were grazed and torn by futile clutchings at the surface of broken rocks : and the protruding neck of the brandy bottle had a trick of digging him playfully in the ribs : which made him swear. Impertinent raindrops chased each other down his cheeks and forehead ; trickling into his eyes, and blinding him at critical moments when he dared not release a hand to brush them away. The inch-by-inch progress to which he was condemned fretted the hasty spirit of the man ; anxiety consumed him, and conspired with impatience to beget a nightmare illusion that he had been battling with naked rock and dripping vegetation since the beginning of Time.

Once,—for all the caution with which he crept backward and downward,—his foot slipped, on the wet surface of a boulder ; and, in the hope of avoiding a fall, he clutched at a small shrub, with one hand, shielding the aggressive brandy bottle with the other. But the treacherous sapling yielded under his weight ; and wrenching its roots from the moist earth, he rolled over and over, knocking his head and chest violently against outlying peninsulars of rock.

Both hands were requisitioned now, in a vain effort to check a descent that had become too rapid for comfort or dignity: and before long, a musical clink, followed by a strong whiff of spirit, announced the fate of the brandy bottle.

“Damn the thing!” he exclaimed in an access of helpless fury. Then a fresh blow on his head whelmed anger and anxiety in sheer pain, and sent him rolling like a log into a kindly patch of undergrowth, which had, so far, blocked his downward view.

Here he lay awhile, half stunned, small runnels of water trickling from his clothing. But his vitality—never long in abeyance—soon reasserted itself. He sat up, and his hand went instinctively to his pocket. Drawing out the beheaded bottle, he was relieved to find that it still held a tablespoonful or more; and that his handkerchief was saturated with the precious fluid. He sucked a mouthful from it with keen satisfaction: then, using it for a wad, plugged up the bottle; and undaunted by bruises, dizziness, torn hands, and smarting feet, lost no time in starting afresh.

For the time being, progress was simpler, and less hazardous: and, once through the undergrowth, he came with disconcerting abruptness upon that which he sought.

Eight feet below him, on a merciful ledge of earth wide enough to check the fatal rebound into space, Eldred Lenox lay face downward, his left arm crumpled under him; the other flung outward as if in a last desperate effort to ward off the inevitable. Shaitan was nowhere to be seen. The sheer drop beyond told his fate.

Soldier as he was, and inured to the sight of death in its most barbarous aspect, Desmond's heart stood still as he looked down upon that powerful figure of manhood lying helpless and alone, pattered upon indifferently by the dripping heavens.

Choosing a spot that promised a soft landing-place, Desmond dropped on to the ledge; knelt beside the injured man; and speedily assured himself that life was not extinct. Unconsciousness was due to a wound on the back of his head, from which blood still trickled sluggishly through the thick black hair. The arm crumpled under

him was broken below the elbow. Very gently, as though he were a child asleep, Desmond turned him on to his back. His eyes showed fixed and glazed between half-open lids, and a deep scratch disfigured his cheek. Pillowing the inert head on one arm, Desmond applied the spirit to his lips again and again, a few drops at a time: till the lids lifted heavily, and life returned with a slow shuddering breath.

Desmond bent down to him eagerly.

"Not going out this journey, Lenox, old chap."

But no answering gleam rewarded him; no movement of limb or feature. Only the lids fell again; and Desmond knew that this was no fainting fit, but collapse from probable damage to the brain.

After applying more brandy to the lips and temples without result, he removed his Norfolk coat—still warm and dry within—and with the help of two fir boughs contrived to shelter Lenox's head and chest from the chilling downpour. Then he set to work on the broken arm. The same fir,—springing sturdily from a cleft in the rock below,—provided a splint; and with two handkerchiefs (he had wrung the last drop of rain-diluted brandy from his own) he tied the injured limb skilfully and securely into place. That done, there remained nothing but to wait:—the hardest task that can be assigned to a man of action.

And to wait sitting was beyond him. Steady pacing in the cramped space available helped to deaden thought and promote warmth,—for by now his soaked shirt-sleeves clung to his arms.

He kept it up doggedly till approaching footsteps brought his damp vigil to an end; and Colonel Mayhew stepped on to the ledge.

"Alive?" he asked, glancing at the prostrate figure, and Desmond nodded.

"Can't get him round, though. Concussion, I'm afraid. A nasty wound on his head, and one arm fractured. But for that strip of undergrowth, he would have been done for. Hope to God that lazy beggar Garth hurried up after O'Malley. We won't wait here, though.—Come on, *coolie-lög*."

Colonel Mayhew going forward to lend a hand, glanced over the precipitous drop on his right, and turned hastily away again. That which had been Shaitan was visible below ; and it was not pleasant to look at.

"Lenox 'll be cut up about that," he muttered as they lifted him cautiously on to the reeking strip of blanket.

It was a dreary journey up that corkscrew footpath, inch-deep in running water, that led to the ordinary levels of life. Desmond kept his post by Lenox's head and shoulders, sheltering him still with the discarded coat, and clinging to the track's edge with supple, stocking-ed feet. But there was no preventing jars and jolts arising from broken ground, and the difficulty of carrying a litter at an almost impossible angle. Half-way up they caught sight of Dr O'Malley,—a Pickwickian figure of a man, booted and spurred,—skipping, stumbling, and slithering towards them in a fashion ludicrous enough to bring a flicker of mirth into Desmond's eyes.

They drew up when, at length, he bore down upon them with a rush of expletives by way of sympathy: for he was good-hearted and a ready man of his tongue, if not a brilliant unit of his profession. His rapid examination of Lenox ended in praise of Desmond's amateur bit of surgery, and a confirmation of his verdict—concussion of the brain.

"An' there's no telling yet, of course, if it's slight or serious. But begad he must have had a nasty tumble. Devilish lucky to get off with his life,—that's a fact. What's the nearest bungalow we can get him into ? 'Tis a good eight miles to the hospital ; and the sooner he's out of this d—d watering-can business the better chance for him."

Desmond turned to Colonel Mayhew.

"How about the Forest bungalow, sir ? Only a couple of miles on, isn't it ? Brodie must be there now ; and he's the right sort, if he is a bit of an anchorite."

"Why, of course. The very thing. He's something of an experimentalist too. Keeps up a small pharmacy in one of his outhouses. He'll make room for Lenox like a shot."

"And for me too, I hope. I'm game to sleep anywhere. But I won't leave Lenox till he's fit to go into Dalhousie."

Colonel Mayhew nodded approval; and the dismal procession set out again; O'Malley enlivening its progress with highly-coloured reminiscences of *khud* accidents he had known, and with incidental attempts at jocularity that fizzled out like damp fireworks. It was all meant kindly enough. But Desmond was thinking of both man and wife as he had seen them greet one another that morning; and an atmosphere of pseudo-hilarity jarred his nerves like a discord in music. For the man possessed that mingling of fortitude and delicacy of feeling, which stands revealed in the lives of so many famous fighters, and may well be termed the hall-mark of heroism.

In due time they came upon the two women, still sitting—drenched and patient—on their bank of soaked fir-needles: and Desmond hurried forward to get in a word or two with Quita unobserved. At sight of him—coatless, mud-bespattered, with torn clothes, and blood-stained face and hands—Honor could not repress a small sound of dismay. But Quita saw in his eyes the one thing she wanted; and may surely be forgiven if she paid small heed to his plight. Her face fell at the details of the damage done.

“Mayn’t I just have a sight of him as he passes us?” she pleaded.

“Better not,” he answered kindly. “You have an artist’s brain, remember; and I want you to sleep a little to-night. Trust me to do every mortal thing I can for him. Honor will see you home, and I’ll send a runner in with news this evening. We’ll pull him through between us,—never fear.”

She tried to speak her thanks; but failing, put out a hand impulsively to speak for her; and his enfolding grasp made her feel less lonely, less desperate than she had felt since the awful moment when her husband vanished into space. The fact that he was in Desmond’s hands seemed a guarantee that all would go well with him. There was no logic in the conclusion; and she knew it. But logic has little to do with conviction: and many who came to know Desmond fell into this same trick of depending on him to win through the thing to which he set his hand. Yet his optimism had no affinity with the cheap school of philosophy, that nurses a

pleasant mind without reference to disconcerting facts. It was the outcome of that supreme faith in an Ultimate Best, working undismayed through failure and pain, which lies at the root of all human achievement: and it was, in consequence, singularly infectious and convincing.

Quita's impressionable spirit readily caught a reflection from its rays: and hope revived sent a glow through all her chilled body.

"Take a stiff whisky toddy the minute you get in," he commanded, while lifting her into the saddle. "And try to remember that over-anxiety won't mend matters. It will only exhaust your strength. I'll come in and see you whenever I can. Ride on at once," he added hastily, for the stretcher, with its pitiful burden, was close upon them. "We'll catch you up."

She obeyed with a childlike docility that touched him to the heart, and he turned quickly to his wife.

"Come on, you dear, drenched woman. You've no business to be here at all; and we mustn't keep 'em waiting."

"But Theo, . . . your feet!" she murmured distressfully. "Are they quite cut to bits?"

"No—not quite." He glanced whimsically down at his dishevelled figure. "Lord, what a scarecrow I must be! Aren't you half-ashamed of owning me?"

"Well—naturally!" she answered, beaming upon him as she set her foot in the hollow of his hand. "I shall see something of you,—shan't I?"

"Trust me for that. See all you can of her too. She's as plucky as they make 'em: but she may need it all and more, before we're through with this, poor little soul."

He mounted, and rode with them as far as the wood-sheds, where the men branched off to the Forest bungalow, leaving the two women to ride on alone: and, in obedience to Desmond's parting injunction, they kept up a steady canter most of the way.

CHAPTER XV.

"How the light light love, he has wings to fly
At suspicion of a bond."

—BROWNING.

THE rugged peak of Bakrota was enveloped in a grey winding-sheet, impenetrable, all-pervading; a dense mass of vapour ceaselessly rolling onward, yet never rolling past. It was as if the mountain had become entangled in the folds of a giant's robe.

The Banksia rose that climbed over the verandah of the Crow's Nest had shed its first crop of blossoms. The border below was strewn with bright petals of storm-scattered flowers; while above the dank pines dripped and drooped beneath the dead weight of universal moisture. The far-off glory of the mountains was blotted out, as though it had never been; and the doll's house, with its subsidiary group of native huts, had the aspect of a dwelling in Cloudland. From within came theplash of water falling drop by drop, suggesting a vision of zinc tubs, pails, and basins, set here, there, and everywhere, to check the too complete invasion of the saturated outer world.

Just outside the drawing-room door, heedless of the mist that hung dewdrops on her lashes, and on blown wisps of hair, Quita stood, devouring with her eyes a damp note, handed to her a minute since by one of Mrs Desmond's *jhampannis*.

"DEAR MISS MAURICE"—(it ran)—"At last I am allowed to write and say—Come. Not this afternoon, because he had quite a long outing this morning in that blessed spell of sunshine; and he is sound asleep after it, has been for an hour and more; or of course he would send a line with this himself. Come to dinner. Half-past seven. Then you can have a long evening together without keeping him up too late. For Theo is still high-handed with him about sleep and rest. But really he has made astonishing progress since we got him over

here. Dr O'Malley is quite comically elated over his recuperative power. Says he has seldom seen such a rapid and vigorous convalescence after concussion; and takes more than half the credit to himself; but I am convinced that it is *you* who are mainly responsible for it. He says little enough, even to Theo. Yet one can see how impatient he is to be well again, because of you; and that's half the battle. Though perhaps my prosaic zeal for concentrated food of all kinds deserves to be taken into account! Theo, who is reading every word of this over my shoulder—in spite of my insistence on the privacy of *all* correspondence!—wishes to point out that his own genius for nursing is really at the bottom of it. (N.B.—This is simply because he wants you to be extra charming to him to-night!) But apart from all my nonsense, the point remains that among us all we have done great things in less than three weeks. Come and see for yourself, and we can squabble over our laurels at leisure!

“Theo sends sympathy and *salaams*, and I think you know that I am very really ‘yours,’

“HONOR M. DESMOND.”

Quita smiled as she folded up the note, though her lashes were wet with more than mist. Tears came too readily to her eyes just now, a fact that engendered occasional bickerings between herself and Michael.

“And to think that I was blind enough to hate that dear woman,” she thought. “I, who pride myself on my intuition!”

Then she scribbled a hasty note of acceptance, despatched the *jhampanni*, and remained standing absently by the verandah rail, looking out into nothingness; trying to grasp the fact that the longest, hardest three weeks of her life were over; that in less than four hours’ time she would once more set eyes on the man who was, to all intents and purposes, her newly accepted lover; would verify in the flesh the remembrance of that wonderful night and morning.

The thought so unsteadied her, that she clenched her hands, and jerked herself together. Having more of

Diana than of Venus in her composition, the intensity of her love—since avowal had levelled all barriers—was a constant surprise to her ; and now she was even a little ashamed of her natural longing for the touch of hands and lips, that she had at times been disposed to scorn. None the less, she hoped, unblushingly, that she would be allowed to have him to herself for an hour or so ; hoped also—nay, confidently expected—that she would end in overruling this stern purpose of his, that irritated her, even while it compelled her admiration.

To her, as to all eager natures, the appeal of the present was all-powerful, the more so when that present offered her with both hands the best that life has to give. To sacrifice it on the altar of a problematical future seemed sheer folly ; magnificent folly, perhaps, but, in the circumstances her quickened heart leaned towards a less magnificent wisdom. She detected in this unmanageable husband of hers a strain of unpretentious heroism, which delighted her in the abstract. But when the heroic puts on flesh and blood, and shoulders itself into our narrow lives, it is apt to appear a little too big for the stage ; and Quita had an artist's eye for proportion, whether in pictures or in the human comedy.

Moreover, a mingling of French and Irish blood rarely results in an irksome development of the conscience, or of that moral bugbear, a sense of responsibility ; and deep down, Quita knew herself to be more like her brother in both respects than she quite cared to acknowledge. For all her husband's conscientious suggestion that marriage was a "complicated affair," she persisted in regarding it simply as the crown and completion of their great love, a happiness to which they were entitled by every law human and divine. The generations still to be had not yet laid their arresting hand upon her. In her esteem, such shadowy probabilities had neither right nor power to stem the new imperious forces at work within her.

It remains to add that Eldred's avowal had not shocked or repelled her as much as he had feared. For, among Michael's promiscuous intimates in Paris, Vienna, Rome, she had seen and heard more than Lenox was likely to

guess of that enslavement to drugs and absinthe to which the artist's temperament seems peculiarly prone; though she was far from realising in detail the full horror and degradation involved. She merely felt certain that—heredity or no—Eldred was, by the nature of him, incapable of travelling far down that awful road; that with her at his side to hearten and help him, he could not fail to free himself from “the accursed chain.”

But they must fight the battle together. That was the Alpha and Omega of her thoughts. He had not yet measured the height and depth of her love. Let her only make this clear to him, and he must give in; if not to-night, at least before his leave was up. Years of living with Michael had accustomed her to getting her own way in all essentials. But she had yet to try her strength against the bed-rock of Scottish granite underlying her husband's surface quietness; against the terrible singleness of mind that cannot—even for Love's dear sake—view harsh facts through a medium of rosy mist.

While she stood thus, trying to see into the darkness that shrouds the coming day, even the coming hour, from inquisitive eyes, the drifting vapour all about her paled from grey to white, from white to a gossamer film; and finally uprose from the valley, like a spotless scroll rolled backward by an unseen Hand, giving gradually to view a multitude of mountains, newly washed; mountains that glowed with richest tints of purple and amethyst and rose, in the level light of afternoon. And Quita, being in a fanciful mood, saw in this “good gigantic smile” of the rain-soaked earth a happy omen; an assurance that so would the mists rise from her own life, and the sunlight prevail. A sudden recollection of the buffalo “*Mèla*” set her smiling.

“How idiotic I am!” she reproved herself gently;—we are apt to be gentle with our own foolishness; it never seems quite so egregious as other people's—“I might be a girl of twenty, after my first proposal, instead of nearly thirty, and a nominal wife of five years' standing.”

She drew out her watch. Four o'clock. Three mortal hours before she could even think of starting. There was nothing for it but to have recourse to her easel, *faute de*

mieux. The last words waked her normal self. They were no less than heresy, treason to her art. Michael would have disowned her, had she spoken them in his hearing! Was Art, then, so small a thing when compared with this overwhelming force of Love, which dwarfed all thoughts and acts that did not minister to its needs? It was too early days as yet to answer so large a question. She simply knew that since that first kiss had set her on the threshold of an unexplored world, Art had lost its grip; that, for the present, at all events, she did not want to paint, but to love and live!

"Pity Michael isn't here to scold me," she thought, as she turned back into the house.

But Michael was away at Jundraghat, the Rajah's summer Residency. His finished portrait had been sent off that afternoon; and he had followed it, for the pleasure of hearing Elsie's thanks and praise in person.

The little room, robbed of the picture that had been its chief ornament for many weeks, looked empty, desolate; and with a restless sigh she went over to her easel. This also was empty. Her study of a hill girl,—begun half jestingly, as a contrast to Michael's flower of Western Maidenhood,—had so grown and beautified under her hands, that it had been voted worthy of a Home Exhibition; and its case now stood against the wall, awaiting mail day. Three or four unfinished pictures leaned against the easel. Quita looked through them, aimlessly, in search of a congenial subject. But they were chiefly landscape studies; and in her present mood Nature seemed a little tame, and bloodless. Her heart cried out for something human, and she wished that Michael would come back.

Then, like a ray of light, came the required inspiration, satisfying at once the counter-claims of Art and Love. She sought out a fresh canvas, set it on the easel, and plunged, forthwith, into a rough head-and-shoulder study of her husband.

Now time no longer stood still. Michael was forgotten. And, while her brush sped hither and thither, she crooned low and clear, the song that had proved the open sesame to her cave of enchantment.

And, in the meantime, Michael—the forgotten—was manipulating a new and delicate complication in a fashion peculiarly his own.

On entering Mrs Mayhew's drawing-room, he had found, not his "moonlight maiden," as it pleased him to call her, but the Button Quail herself, who greeted him with a rather embarrassing effusion of thanks.

"And the best point about it is, that it's really *like* Elsie," she concluded, with an air of paying an exceptional tribute to his skill. "Portraits so seldom *are* like people. Haven't you noticed it? That's why I generally prefer photographs. But your picture is different. There are only two things about it that don't *quite* please me." She paused, eyeing the canvas with her head on one side; and Maurice, who was irresistibly reminded of a bird contemplating a worm, wondered idly what was coming in the way of criticism. "I wish you had allowed her to wear something *smarter* than that limp white silk; and I think she looks much too unpractical, day-dreaming on a verandah railing at that hour of the morning! But then, Elsie *is* rather unpractical; or would be," she added quickly, "if I didn't insist on her helping me with the house. That's where most Anglo-Indian mothers make such a mistake. But *I* always say it is a mother's duty to have *some* consideration for her girl's future husband!"

And she smiled confidentially upon the aspirant at her side. But Maurice, absorbed in critical appraisement of his own skill in rendering the luminous quality of Elsie's eyes, missed the smile; missed also most of the interesting disquisition on her education.

"Yes, yes,—no doubt," he agreed with vague politeness, and Mrs Mayhew opened her round eyes.

But the direction of his gaze was excuse enough for any breach of manners; and she returned to the charge undismayed, approaching her subject this time from a less prosaic point of view.

"Really, Mr Maurice, I never knew till now that I *had* such a pretty daughter! The whole effect is so charming, that I begin to think you must have flattered her!" she remarked archly; and Maurice fell headlong into the trap.

"Flattered her? *Mon Dieu*, no! Nature has taken care to make that impossible. For, although she falls short of true beauty, she has such delicacy of outline, of colouring, an atmosphere so ethereal, that one wants a brush of gossamer dipped in moonlight, not coarse canvas, camel's hair, and oils, if one is even to do her justice. Some day I must try water-colours, or pastels. *Sans doute ça ira mieux.*" He was off on his Pegasus now, far above Mrs Mayhew's bewildered head. "She would make a divine Undine—moonlight, and overhanging trees. The face and figure dimly seen through a veil of water weeds.—But where is she, then?" he broke off, falling suddenly to earth like a rocket. "May one see her this afternoon? I want to hear from herself that she is satisfied."

Mrs Mayhew smiled and nodded, a world of comprehension in her eyes.

"Yes, yes, I can quite believe *that*. I will tell her you are here. She looked rather a wisp after the dance last night, so I sent her up to rest, for the sake of her complexion! But, of *course*, she must come down now. You will find her more entertaining than '*la petite mère*.' She has taken to calling me that lately!"

The complacent little lady took a step forward, then—a bubble with maternal satisfaction—spoke the word too much that is responsible for half the minor miseries of life.

"Do you know, Mr Maurice, it is quite charming of you to have shown me your feelings so openly, and I think the least that I can do is to assure you of my sympathy and approval. I don't feel *quite* so certain about her father. He is wrapped up in the child, and man-like, wants to keep her for himself. But no doubt between us we shall persuade him to listen to reason! Now, I will go to Elsie."

But Michael made haste to interpose;—a changed Michael, puzzled to the verge of anger, yet punctiliously polite withal.

"One moment, Mrs Mayhew, please. It might be as well if you and I understood one another first. It seems that I have been clumsy in expressing myself, that I have given you a false impression. If so, I

ask your pardon. Believe me, I fully sympathise with Colonel Mayhew's reluctance to part with such a daughter; and I am not arrogant enough to dream of asking him to make such a sacrifice — on my behalf."

It was very neatly done. Michael's detached self, looking on at the little scene, applauded it as quite a masterpiece in its way. But Mrs Mayhew stood petrified. Her brain worked slowly, and it took her an appreciable time to realise that she had been something more than a fool. Then, drawing herself up to her full height — barely five feet in her heels, — she answered him with an attempt at hauteur that quite missed fire.

"Since you are so *considerate* of Colonel Mayhew's feelings, I only wonder it has not occurred to you that your conduct during the past two months has been little short of dishonourable?"

"Dishonourable?" His eyes flashed. "*Mais comment?*"

"You have given every one in Dalhousie the impression that you were — in love with Miss Mayhew."

His relief was obvious.

"Naturally, my dear lady. For I *am* in love with her. How could a man, and an artist, be anything else? But marriage — no —" He shook his head decisively. "That is another pair of sleeves. Women are adorable. But they are terrible monopolists; and, frankly, I have no talent for the domesticities. As a lover, I am well enough. But as a husband — believe me, in six months I should drive a woman distracted! Ask Quita. She knows. If I have given Miss Mayhew cause to regret her kindness to me, I am inconsolable; though, in any case, I can never regret the privilege of having known, and — loved her."

Throughout this ingenious jumble of egoism and gallantry, his listener had been freezing visibly. On the last word she compressed her mouth to a mere line, and stabbed the unrepentant sinner with her eyes; since it was unhappily impossible to stab him with a hatpin, which she would infinitely have preferred.

"I have never in my *life* heard any man express such improper ideas upon a serious subject," she remarked with icy emphasis. "And I am *quite* thankful that your peculiar views prevent you from wishing to marry my daughter."

"*Bien!* Then we are of one mind after all," Maurice answered cheerfully. "And since we understand each other, may I at least be permitted to see Miss Mayhew before I go?"

"See her? Certainly *not*. Really, Mr Maurice, your effrontery astounds me! Understand, please, that from to-day there is an *end* of your free-and-easy French intimacies! Colonel Mayhew and I have to consider her good name and her future happiness; and we cannot allow you, or any man, to endanger either."

Michael shrugged his shoulders. His disappointment was keener than he cared to show; but this hopeless little woman, with her bourgeois point of view, was obviously blind and deaf to common-sense or reason.

"I would not for the world endanger Miss Mayhew's happiness, or her good name," he said, not without dignity. "And as one may not see her, there is no more to be said."

He held out his hand. But Mrs Mayhew's manners were not proof against so severe a shock to her maternal vanity. She bowed as if the gesture had escaped her notice.

"Good-bye, Mr Maurice," she said rigidly.

He returned her bow in silence, slipped the rejected hand into his pocket, and went out.

In passing through the hall he was aware of a slim white figure coming down the broad staircase; and without an instant's hesitation he stood still. In spite of "the little she-dragon in there," he would see her yet. For the knowledge that he had lost her increased her value tenfold.

"You are really pleased with it—tell me?" he said eagerly as their hands met, for he saw the question in her eyes.

"Pleased? You know I am. It is *much* too good of you to give me such a splendid present; and father is

simply delighted. But why are you going away? I thought you would stay to tea."

He still held her hand, in defiance of a gentle attempt to withdraw it, and now he pressed it closer.

"Unhappily I must go," he said, without looking at her. "Your mother will tell you why, better than I can do. Good-bye—*petite amie*. Think well of me, if you can."

He bent over her hand, kissed it lingeringly, and was gone before she could find words to express her bewilderment.

CHAPTER XVI.

"What we love we'll serve, aye, and suffer for too."

—W. PENN.

AFTER sunset the mist came down again, thick as cotton-wool. Heaven and earth were obliterated, and a quietly determined downpour set in for the night.

Quita was still at her easel, trying bravely to disregard the collapse of her happy omen; Michael lounging in a cane chair, with Shelley and a cigarette. He had returned from Jundraghat in a mood of skin-deep nonchalance, beneath which irritation smouldered, and Quita's news had set the sparks flying. Behold him, therefore, doubly a martyr; ready, as always, to make capital out of his crown of thorns. A renewed patterning on the verandah slates roused him from the raptures of the Epipsychedion.

"Well, at least you can't think of going *now*," he said, flinging the book aside with a gesture of impatience. "That's one blessing, if the rest's a blank."

Quita, who was washing out her brushes, looked round quickly.

"I'm sorry to leave you alone in a bad mood, Michael; but I mean to go, whatever the weather chooses to say about it."

"*Parbleu!* But what has come to you, Quita? You are infatuated with that granite-natured Scotchman!"

"And if I am . . . I have every right to be."

Her gaze had returned to the vigorous outline on the easel, and her voice softened to an unconscious tenderness, peculiarly exasperating to a man in Michael's mixed frame of mind.

"*Naturellement!*" he answered with a shrug. "Being a woman, you have divine right to monopolise a man,—if the man is fool enough to submit to it. Nature is determined that you women shall not escape your real trade. That is why she takes care to make every one of you a bourgeois at heart. And all these years I have cherished the delusion that you, at least, were a genuine artist!"

"So I am. Every whit as much as yourself."

"And also—a genuine woman?"

"I hope so."

Michael smiled—a smile of superior knowledge.

"One cannot serve two masters, *ma chère*. That's where the complication comes in, when an artist happens also to be a woman. The creative force, mental or physical, is a master-force. Only a superhuman vitality can accomplish both with any hope of success. Succumb to your womanhood, and there's an end of your Art—*voilà tout.*"

"But no, Michel. I won't believe that." She spoke stoutly, though cold fear was upon her that a germ of truth lurked in his statement.

"Believe it or not, as you please. You are on the high-road to make the discovery for yourself, and you will find it a case of no compromise. One of the two must predominate. You will either become an amateur artist or an amateur wife and mother. Which do you suppose it will be?"

She shut her paint-box with an impatient snap.

"I really don't know. I am not in the mood for abstract speculation."

"No. You are in the mood for concrete love-making; and in pursuit of it, you're ready to face a drenching, to leave me in the worst possible company, without a sisterly qualm, and without even troubling to put my razor in your pocket."

"Don't talk melodramatic nonsense," she rebuked him sharply. Then pity and tenderness prevailed. "If it's really as bad as that, *mon cher*, why on earth didn't you take yesterday's chance, and ask Elsie to be your wife? I believe she would have said 'Yes.'"

"So do I. Therefore I preferred not to ask her. Still—it's none the less maddening that because you women have this incurable mania for marriage, one should be cut off from her sweet companionship, from the inspiration that is to be found in that delectable borderland between friendship and love; and insulted into the bargain by a chit of a mother-woman, with no more brains and imagination than a sparrow! But for me, at any rate, there can be no compromise. I do not choose to profane the sanctuary of my soul, to corrupt my Art, by becoming a mere breadwinner, a slave of the hearth-rug, and the tea-cup—in fact, the property of a woman. That's what it amounts to. And I doubt if any of us relish the position when it comes to the point. Even that devoted husband of yours, after waiting five years upon your imperial pleasure, seems in no hurry to tie himself up again; or you would hear less about his conscientious scruples, I assure you. They would be swept aside, like straws before a flood."

At that Quita's eyes flashed.

"Michel, you *shall* not speak so of him," she cried imperiously. "I've said already that I won't have the subject discussed. How should *you* understand a man like Eldred,—you, who hardly know the meaning of the word 'conscience'?"

"*Dieu merci*; since its chief function seems to be to make oneself and every one else uncomfortable.—Hark at the rain! I wish you joy of your journey."

He spoke the last words to an empty room. Quita was already changing her dress hurriedly, defiantly, shutting her ears to the discouraging sounds without. Michael's half-jesting insinuation had hit her harder than he guessed; had deepened her determination to extricate herself, without loss of time, from a position that justified a suggestion so galling to her pride.

But the mere getting down from the top of Bakrota,

and climbing half-way up the neighbouring hill, through a desolating world of mist and rain, was, in itself, a prospect that would have daunted a less headstrong woman. Michael returned her hasty "good-night" in a voice of resigned martyrdom, and out in the verandah, four drenched *jhampannis* cowering round a hurricane-lantern, had passed beyond martyrdom to the verge of open rebellion.

They were poor men, and the Miss Sahib's slaves, they protested in chorus; but it was a very bad rain. Even with the lantern, it would be impossible to keep the path; and if harm should come to the Protector of the Poor, the Sahib would smite them without mercy. Also the "mate"¹ was even now shivering with ague; in proof whereof he so vigorously shook the lantern that it almost fell out of his hand.

But Quita was adamant. She bade them set out at once, or the Sahib would smite them there and then. Awed by a threat that would never have been executed, they hastened to assure her that she was, collectively and individually, their "father and mother," that their worthless lives were at her service, and that they would start forthwith.

Three minutes later, they were swinging cautiously along the four-foot track that corkscrews down to the level of the Mall, the foremost man thrusting the lantern well ahead, with the sole result that a great white circle showed weirdly upon the curtain of mist, through which they journeyed by faith, and not by sight. With every step of the way Quita's conviction grew that she had pushed persistence to the verge of folly; and the thought of Michael, alone and dejected, tugged at her heart. The rain formed miniature canals in the waterproof sheet that covered her; and more than once a jerk of the dandy emptied these into her lap; while the mist itself was so dense that she seemed to be breathing water instead of air. There was no denying that to-morrow would do as well as to-night. But her impatient spirit fretted against delay; and this senseless obtrusion of inanimate things,—angering her, as only the inanimate can,—drowned the still small voice of common-sense.

¹ Headman.

Nevertheless, human will and endeavour have small chance in a duel with that invisible Force, which men call Fate. In the language of the East, "it was written" that she should not get down the hill that night; and before they reached the Mall, Quita was compelled to own herself beaten.

A jerk, a crash, followed by darkness, and a thud that brought her half-overturned dandy into violent contact with the ground, fairly settled the matter. The "mate" had missed the path; and, but for an instantaneous counter-jerk on the part of the men behind, Quita would have been shot down the *khud*, instead of on to the stony roadway. As it was, she thrust out both hands to save herself, while the rain pattered through the light lace scarf on to her head and neck. The lantern glass was broken, and the "mate," lamenting volubly, declared that his arm appeared to be broken also. Quita herself was ignominiously damp and bedraggled; and vanity apart, going on was out of the question. Even getting back, minus the lantern, would be a difficult matter. With tears in her eyes, and fierce disappointment at her heart, she submitted to the inevitable.

Michael greeted her with lifted eyebrows, and an exasperating chuckle.

"Thought ten minutes of it would be enough for you," he remarked coolly; and her wrath against things in general vented itself on him.

"Really, Michel, you are *detestable*! It was *not* enough. The 'mate' lost his footing, and the lantern broke. Oh, it's cruel . . . after nearly three weeks . . ."

Her voice broke, and Michael, thankful to see her again, took one of her hands and drew her towards him.

"*Pauvre chérie*," he said more gently. "Don't break your heart over it. Send a note to say you'll come tomorrow, and cheer me up a bit now, like the sweet sister you are."

There was nothing else to be done. Arming an adventurous *sais* with Maurice's lantern, an alpenstock, and two notes tied up in a scrap of oiled silk, Quita choked down her misery, and did her utmost to comply with his request. But the meal was only a partial success, for the

rebellious heart of her was out there in the rain, following the notes to their destination.

They did not reach it till well after eight o'clock, when those who awaited her had given up all hope, and were just sitting down to dinner.

Lenox still wore his arm in a sling, and the lines in his face looked deeper than usual. Otherwise he was quite himself again. The anxiety in his eyes gave place to dejection as Honor handed him Quita's note.

"Shall I open it for you?" she added gently.

He frowned, and thanked her. There are few things more galling to a man than helplessness over trifles. He laid the open note beside his plate, and its half-dozen lines of love took him an amazingly long while to read: for Quita, like many spontaneous natures, had the gift of making herself almost seen and heard by means of a few written words. He tried to win comfort from the thought that it was only a matter of getting through eighteen hours, after all, and roused himself resolutely to a fair semblance of cheerfulness. But both husband and wife were too keenly sympathetic to be quite successful in their attempts to change the current of his thoughts; and their own hearts were heavy with a great anxiety for Desmond's life-long friend, Paul Wyndham. A phenomenal downpour at Dera Ishmael had produced a prolific crop of fever cases, and Wyndham's had taken a serious turn. The last two days had brought such disquieting news that Desmond was already half-inclined to throw up the rest of his leave and go straight down to Paul's bedside. The possibility of broaching the subject to his wife that night so absorbed his mind that surface conversation was an effort; and all three were thankful when the meal was over.

"Bring your coffee and cigars into the drawing-room, and we'll have some music," Honor said, as they rose from the table, and Lenox looked his gratitude. Intimate speech of any kind, even with Desmond, was anathema to him just then; and his full heart went out to this woman, whose genius for divining others' needs was so unerring, because her sympathies were so deep and true.

He determined to put Quita out of his head for the

evening, if she would consent to stay there ; and less than five minutes after this triumph of common-sense, a slight stir in the verandah roused him to unreasoning hope that it might be she after all. But it was only Amar Singh, the bearer, with a telegram for Desmond.

His heart stood still as he tore it open ; then a stifled sound of dismay brought Honor instantly to his side.

"Dearest—what is it ?" she asked under her breath.

For answer he handed her the flimsy scrap of paper, and went quickly into the next room. Honor's eyes took in the curt statement at a glance.

"Leave cancelled. Return at once. Infantry for cholera camp. None of ours yet. Wyndham worse. High temperature persists. Condition critical."

A low sound escaped her, and she passed the telegram to Lenox. It was from her brother, Colonel Meredith, now in command of the regiment.

"A double blow," she murmured mechanically. "By this time it may be—all over !"

Her lips quivered, but she did not follow her husband, knowing that in the first bewilderment of grief he would prefer to be alone. And Lenox had no answer for her ; had, in fact, scarcely heard what she said. Then, as his brain grasped the latter half of the telegram, he glanced at her. He had never seen her look less like herself.

"I'm afraid this has hit you hard," he said, with more of feeling in his eyes than he knew how to put into his tone. "But you mustn't take the worst for granted. Desmond won't, if I know anything of him."

"I hope not. But this is . . . Paul ; and you don't know what that means to us both. Besides . . . the saints of the earth are always taken too soon."

"No, not always. Fate does sometimes make mistakes on the right side . . . by accident," he added grimly. "I suppose one of these has gone to the Strawberry Bank. I must send Zyarulla off at once to get my traps together. It means starting first thing."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Yes. But not you, surely. You're hardly fit for duty yet."

"Nonsense. Barring my arm, I'm fit for anything."

And if we're in for cholera, I don't see myself leaving Dick to handle the Battery without me."

"You're bound to ask Dr O'Malley's permission, though."

"Yes, worse luck. But I fancy I shall square him. At the same time—it's hard lines—"

He broke off short. The thing did not bear speaking of.

"It *is* bitterly hard lines, for you both," Honor answered, looking away from him. But she knew the best men of her service too well to suggest that, without straining a point, he might honestly be declared unfit for duty.

"At least it will be a comfort to her having *you* here," he went on mechanically, because the thing had to be said somehow. "I'll leave a note, of course, but I'd be grateful if you'd take it for me some time in the morning. She may not understand how impossible it is for a man to hold back—on any pretext, at a time like this, and I know I can trust *you* to make things clear to her. You're more than half a soldier yourself."

"So I ought to be!" Honor answered, inexpressibly touched by his confidence in her. "And of course I would go to her if I were here. But to-morrow I shall be on my way back to Dera with you both."

"Dera!—But that would be madness. Do you suppose Desmond would ever hear of such a thing?"

"I haven't supposed anything about it yet," she answered, smiling. "I only know that I can't let him go down into—all that, alone. Now I must say good-night, and go to him. We'll make all arrangements for the journey," she added, as they shook hands, "and Zyarulla will do the packing for you. So be sure and get some sleep when you have seen Dr O'Malley."

His face hardened.

"I only know one way to make sure of that," he said, avoiding her eyes.

"Oh, no, no; not that way, please."

"I imagine it'll be that or none," he answered almost roughly, as he turned away, and with a sigh Honor followed her husband into the dining-room.

He sat with his back to her, elbows planted on the writing-table, his head between his hands. But at her approach he looked up, and with a sharp contraction of heart she saw that tears stood in his eyes. A woman takes small account of her own wet lashes, but a man's tears are like drops of blood wrung from the heart.

Honor took his head between her hands, and kissed him, long and tremulously. After that there seemed no need for words on the subject nearest their hearts.

“ You knew why I didn’t come sooner ? ” was all she said, and Desmond pressed the hand resting on his shoulder. Then, seating herself opposite him on the edge of the table, she glanced at the telegraph form lying before him.

“ Are you wiring for more news ? ”

“ Yes. I want an ‘ urgent,’ care of the Station-master, to catch me at Lahore to-morrow night, and another at Jhung dak bungalow next day ; unless . . . of course . . . ”

“ Hush, hush. You *must* not think of that.”

He frowned, and was silent. The two men loved one another as men linked by half a lifetime of toil and ambition learn to love,—or hate ; and in the face of a calamity so unthinkable, even Desmond’s incurable hopefulness was shaken.

“ Captain Lenox believes he will be allowed to go,” Honor went on after a pause. “ But he’s hardly fit for it, is he ? ”

“ Not quite, perhaps, though he’s made of iron under it all, and if he’s set on going, I don’t fancy O’Malley will stand in his way.”

“ I told him we would make all travelling arrangements, and you’ll be sending Dunnī out with this, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes. At once. Why ? ”

“ Because I want him to take a note to Mrs Rivers at the same time.”

“ Mrs Rivers ? Would you sooner go to her than stay on here ? ”

Honor smiled.

“ Do you really imagine I shall stay on here ? ”

“ Why not ? It would save the trouble of moving ;

and you wouldn't feel lonely with the little chap for company."

"But, you dear, foolish man, can't you see that it's *you* I want?" And she leaned forward, speaking quickly to stave off interruption. "Don't make a fuss about it, please; because I have settled everything in my mind. I'll ask Mrs Rivers to take baby and Parbutti for me. I know she gladly will. As for me, of course I go down to Dera to-morrow, and do what I can for you all."

At that Desmond straightened himself; and Honor foresaw one of those pitched battles, which, between natures equally imperious and hot-headed, were unavoidable from time to time; while Desmond, because he meant to have his own way, dared not let her see how profoundly he was moved by this culminating proof of her devotion.

"My dear Honor, the thing is out of the question," he said decisively. "It's splendid of you even to think of coming down. But it would be unpardonable in me to allow it, so be a sensible woman and put the notion out of your head, once for all. You know you could never bear to leave little Paul when it came to the point."

"I could . . . I could. Oh, Theo, don't be unreasonable over this."

"The unreasonableness is yours, my dear. If this is going to be bad, we may all be off into camp before the week's out."

"Well, then, Frank would take me in . . . and at least I should be on the spot—in case . . . Oh, Theo, I *must* come! Why on earth shouldn't I be there just as much as Frank, and that little missionary woman, Mrs Peters?"

"Frank" Olliver, a Major's wife, was the only other woman in the regiment, and hill stations were not (as she would have expressed it) "in her line." But Desmond was immovable.

"That's quite another matter. Being there already, they naturally wouldn't desert their post. But you are here, thank God, safe out of it all; and I must insist on your remaining here, if it's only for my sake." A half smile dispelled the gravity of his face. "I've a notion

that when you married me you promised, among other things, to obey me!"

"Well, I was driven to. It was the only way to get you. But I'm sure most of us make that promise with mental reservations. In certain cases I should not dream of obeying you, Theo, and this is one!"

"But if I flatly refuse to take you with me?"

"I suppose I should have to follow on alone."

He looked at her straightly for a moment. Then: "I don't think you would deliberately defy me, Honor," he said in a level tone. "I couldn't put up with that, even from you."

There was a short silence. She saw that in direct opposition to his will she could go no further. But the woman who loves, and knows herself beloved, has subtler weapons at command. Setting her two hands upon his shoulders, and bringing her beautiful face very close to his, Honor returned her husband's look with a smile so mutely beseeching, that his fortitude, already undermined by the news from Dera, began to waver, and she saw it.

"My very dearest," she said, on a low note of tenderness, "of course I would never defy you. But don't break my heart by pushing me on one side, and leaving me up here alone, idle, anxious, when there is real work—woman's work—waiting to be done down there. I'm as strong as a church, you know that. And I could help with Paul when he is convalescent. We could have him in the bungalow. I know separation is bound to come some day. But not in this terrible fashion, and not yet. *Please, Theo, not yet.*"

Then, because tears threatened, she leaned down till her forehead rested against his shoulder, and furtively dried her lashes with the back of her hand. When a strong woman lays aside her strength, and relies on the inherent power of her womanhood, no man on earth is a match for her. Desmond could only surrender at discretion, and take her altogether to himself.

"And you began by saying you would never defy me!" he whispered into her ear. "What else do you call this, I wonder? You incurable woman! Is it really because

you are so keen to help, or chiefly because you want to be in my pocket? Which?"

"Chiefly because I want to be in your pocket," she answered without shame, and he kissed her bowed head.

"But mind you," his tone changed abruptly, "I have no business to give in to you; and if any harm should come of it, I could never forgive myself. I believe I should blow my brains out on the spot."

At that she lifted her head and stood up beside him.

"Theo, you *shall* not say such dreadful things."

"It's no more than the truth," he answered, with a touch of defiance. "Lord, how you women, and the children you give us, complicate life for a man! Yet it's not worth a brass farthing without you both."

"Thank you for owning that much!—Now I must write my note, and see about packing. Come up soon, dear. There's an endless deal to do before we can think of going to bed."

On his way up to join her twenty minutes later, Desmond looked into Lenox's small room. Zyarulla had strewn the floor with books, boots, clothes, and a couple of boxes, preparatory to going into action. His master, enveloped in a cloud of blue smoke, sat afar off directing the plan of campaign. A great peace pervaded his aspect, and the unmistakable fragrance that filled the room brought two deep lines into Desmond's forehead.

"Just looked in to find out how you were getting on," said he. "Not seen O'Malley already, have you?"

"No. But his verdict is a foregone conclusion, so we're going ahead with things. Your wife's not really coming, is she?"

"Yes. I did my best to prevent it; but there's no gainsaying her."

"Great Scott, she's a plucky woman! You must have plenty to see to both of you. Don't let me keep you, old chap, I'm all right."

"Glad to hear it. You'll sleep. That's certain. But I wish to goodness you'd given Nature a chance."

"Nature wouldn't have given *me* a chance," the other answered with sudden heat. "And there's a limit to

what a man can stand. By the way," he added in an altered tone, "I can't tell you how sorry I am about Wyndham. But you must hope for the best."

"Thanks," Desmond answered quietly. "Good-night."

The door of his wife's room stood ajar, and in passing it to go to his dressing-room, his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a muffled sob. Treading softly, he pushed the door open, and looked in.

A night-light in the basin, and one candle on the dressing-table showed him a tall white figure bending over the rail of the cot where his son lay asleep. Honor had discarded her dinner dress for a light wrapper, and her loosened hair fell in a dusky mass almost to her knees.

For a few seconds Desmond stood watching her, uncertain whether to intrude upon her grief or no. He knew her peculiar dread of separation from those she loved, knew that throughout the sixteen months of her child's life she had never left him for more than a few hours except to go to Chumba, and then not without remonstrance. Yet she was leaving him now of her own free will, for an indefinite time, and in the full knowledge of the grim possibilities ahead. It is in such rare moments of revelation that a man realises dimly what it may mean for a woman dowered with the real courage and dignity of self-surrender to give herself to him; that he is vouchsafed a glimpse into that mystery of love, which cynics of the decadent school dismiss as "amoristic sentiment," a fictitious glorification of mere natural instinct. But Desmond took a simpler, more reverential view of a quality which he believed to be the most direct touch of the Divine in man, and which he had proved to be the corner-stone of his wife's character.

He went forward at length, but so noiselessly that Honor had no idea of his presence till his arms came round her from behind, and drew her up so close against him that her wet cheek touched his own.

"Theo . . . that wasn't fair!" she protested with a little broken laugh.

"Not quite. But I couldn't resist it."

Then they stood silent, looking down at the sleeping child.

He lay on his back, one half-opened hand flung high above his head, and the fair soft face, in its halo of red-gold hair, bore the impress of the angelic, that only comes with sleep, and vanishes like magic at the lifting of the eyelids.

Suddenly Desmond tightened his hold of her, and by a mutual impulse their lips met.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Our frailties are invincible, our virtues barren ; and the battle goes sore against us to the going down of the sun."—R. L. S.

THE rain, which had set in with such quiet determination at sunset, fulfilled its promise of continuing through the night : and the patterning on the slates that had mingled with Quita's latest thoughts greeted her, with derisive iteration, when she opened her eyes next morning. But its power to thwart her was at an end. Now that daylight was come, nothing short of a landslip could withhold her from the thing she craved. The thought leaped in her brain before she was fully awake. "And after all, why should I wait till the afternoon," was her practical conclusion. "I'll go down at eleven."

With that she sprang out of bed, and slipping on a dull blue dressing-gown, hurried into the dining-room, where she and Michael always met for *chota hazri*.

Here she found him, in Japanese sleeping suit and slippers, smiling contentedly over an item of his early post.

"What's pleasing you, *mon cher* ?" she asked absently, depositing a light kiss on his hair. For a woman in love—and a man no less—is as royally indifferent to the joys and sorrows of all creation as childhood itself.

"A letter from my pretty Puritan. It is not for nothing that she has those straight brows, and that small resolute chin. She will not be thrust down any man's throat for all the hen-sparrows in Christendom!"

"Why—what does she say?" Quita asked, peering critically into the teapot, and wondering how it would feel to pour out Eldred's early tea!

"Listen then; and judge for yourself:

"DEAR MR MAURICE,—There seems to have been an unlucky misunderstanding between you and mother yesterday. But I hope this need not make any real difference in our friendship. Because I think we have always understood each other, haven't we? Of course if my parents prefer that we should not be about together quite so much, there is no help for it. But at least I would like you to know that I am still, as I always have been, your friend (if you wish it)

"ELSIE MAYHEW."

"*Tiens!* How is that for your 'child of twenty'? It is the letter of a woman; and a woman with an exquisite sense of her own dignity into the bargain."

Quita smiled thoughtfully as she buttered her toast.

"I am wondering how she would have answered if you had asked her," was all she said. "I don't feel quite so certain as I did last night."

"*Ni moi non plus.* Which makes the situation just twice as interesting. For all the Button Quail's beak and claws, I fancy I shall see more of my Undine yet!"

With a chuckle of satisfaction, he fell to re-reading Elsie's note: and Quita, immersed in her own affairs, promptly forgot them both.

An hour later she reappeared—her whole face and form radiating the light within; went straight to her easel, flung aside its draperies, and surveying her work of the previous day, found it very good. But there were certain lines and shadows that displeased her critical eye. She would study his face afresh this morning, with the twofold appreciation of heart and brain, and surprise him with the picture when it was nearer completion.

Just then the bearer, entering, handed her a note. She opened it eagerly—recognising Eldred's handwriting—and read, with a bewilderment bordering on despair, the stoical statement of facts set down by Lenox in the

first bitterness of disappointment, ten hours ago. The shock staggered her like a blow between the eyes. Her lips parted and closed on a soundless exclamation. The abrupt change in her face was as if a light had been suddenly blown out.

"*Mon Dieu, . . . cholera!*" she murmured helplessly, putting one hand over her eyes as if to shut out the horror of it. "This is my punishment for ever having let him go."

Then, as if in hope of discovering some mitigation of her sentence, she re-read the short letter, lingering on the last paragraph, which alone contained some ray of comfort, some assurance of the strong love that was at once the cause and the anodyne of their mutual pain.

"And now, my dearest" (Lenox wrote), "what more can I say, except—be of good courage, and write to me often. The rest, and there's a good deal of it, can't be put upon paper. That's the curse of separation. Start a picture, and throw your heart into your work, as I must into mine. God knows when I shall see you again. But trust me, Quita, as soon as ever I can, and dare, to put an end to this intolerable state of things.—Till then, and always, your devoted husband,

E. L."

It was the first time he had signed himself thus: and the envelope was addressed 'Miss Maurice'! The irony of it cut her to the quick. Tears of self-pity, flooding her eyes, startled her back to reality; and sent her stumbling towards her own room. But before she could reach it, Michael's voice arrested her.

"Come on, Quita," he shouted good-humouredly. "Where are you off to? I want my breakfast."

She turned upon him a face distorted with grief.

"*Parbleu, chérie, qu'y-a-t'il a maintenant?*" he demanded, with an odd mingling of irritation and concern.

"Cholera at Dera Ishmael—Eldred's gone down this morning. . . ." Then tears overwhelmed her, and she turned sharply away. "Oh go, . . . go, and have

your breakfast, Michel ; and let me be. I want nothing, nothing, but to be left alone."

And vanishing into her room, she bolted the door behind her.

Maurice frowned, and sighed. In all his knowledge of her, Quita had never so completely lost her self-control. It was quite upsetting : and he disliked being upset the first thing in the morning. It put him out of tune for the rest of the day. But after all . . . one must eat. And he retraced his steps to the dining-room.

"I wish to heaven she had never discovered this uncomfortable husband of hers!" he reflected as he went. "Since he will neither marry her, nor leave her alone : and it is we who have to suffer for his heroics!"

For all that, he found speedy consolation in the thought that at ten o'clock a new 'subject' was coming to sit to him :—a wrinkled hag, whom he had met on his way back from Jundraghat, bent half double under a towering load of grass, her neutral-tinted tunic and draped trousers relieved by the scarlet of betel-nut on her lips and gums, and by a goat's-hair necklet strung with raw lumps of amber and turquoise, interset with three plaques of beaten silver ;—the only form of savings bank known to these simple children of the hills.

While hastily demolishing his breakfast, Maurice visualised his picture in every detail : and with the arrival of his model all thought of Quita and her woes was crowded out of his mind. Yet the man was not heartless, by any means. He was simply an artist of the extreme type, endowed by temperament with the capacity for subordinating all things,—his own griefs no less than the griefs of others,—to one dominant, insatiable purpose. And according to his lights he must be judged.

Quita remained invisible till lunch-time, lying inert, where she had flung herself, upon her unmade bed.

The first tempest of misery, and rebellion, and self-castigation had given place to sheer exhaustion. For even suffering has its limitations ; which is perhaps the reason why grief rarely kills. All the springs of life seemed suddenly to have run down. Her spirit felt crushed and

broken by the obstructiveness of all about her. The strain of the past three weeks, following upon a severe shock, had told upon her more than she knew; and this morning's sharp revulsion of feeling brought her near to purely physical collapse.

And while she lay alone through two endless hours, tracing designs from the cracks in the whitewashed wall, one conviction haunted her with morbid persistence. Because she had not valued him in the beginning, because she had repudiated him in a moment of wounded pride, he would be taken from her, now that heart and soul were set upon him, and she would never see him again. It was useless to argue that the idea was childish; a mere nightmare of overwrought nerves. It persisted and prevailed, till she felt herself crushed in the grip of a relentless, impersonal Force, against which neither penitence nor tears would avail.

Finally, worn out with pain and rebellion, she fell asleep.

BOOK III.—THE TENTS OF ISHMAEL.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Leave the what at the what’s-its-name,
 Leave the sheep without shelter ;
 Leave the corpse uninterred,
 Leave the bride at the altar.”

—KIPLING.

EVEN in a land where danger and discomfort flourish like the ungodly, that journey from the cedar-crowned Himalayas to the white hot flats of the Derajat, with the Punjab furnace in full swing, was an experience not readily forgotten by the three who set out upon it in the dripping grey dawn of a July morning. Before them stretched two nights and three days of pure martyrdom, aggravated by that prince of evils—a troubled mind : for the Desmonds a haunting anxiety, and for Lenox the harassing realisation that his own strength or weakness during the next few months stood for no less than the happiness or misery of the only woman on earth. It is this irrevocable fusion of two lives, and the network of responsibilities arising from an act less simple than it seems, that constitute the strength, the charm, the tragedy of marriage : and a dim foreknowledge of its complexity dawned upon Lenox during his penitential progress into a land of fire and death.

Throughout their fifty mile descent to the foot-hill terminus it rained perseveringly. But toward evening the clouds parted ; and an hour of sunshine set the drenched earth steaming like a soup kettle when the lid is lifted off. Desmond had ordained that Lenox and his wife should be carried down in doolies ; an indignity to which they submitted under protest : and Honor, scram-

bling out of her prison through an opening level with the ground, passed quite gratefully from its stuffy twilight, redolent of sodden canvas and humanity, to the smell of hot wood and leather that pervaded the sun-saturate railway carriage awaiting them in Pathankôt station.

With the unhurried deftness of an experienced pilgrim, she set about making the place cooler, and more habitable ; drew up all the window-shutters ; opened her bedding roll ; and taking possession of Lenox, established him, with tender imperiousness, in the least stifling corner, a pillow set lengthways behind him. He leaned against it, and closed his eyes.

“ Head bad ? ” she asked a little anxiously. For the concussion headache is no child’s play ; and ten hours in a doolie might breed neuralgia in a cannon-ball.

“ Pretty average. Nothing to trouble about.” The assurance was not convincing : and she gleaned the truth from two deep lines in his forehead.

“ I’m going to make you some tea in a minute,” she announced cheerfully, opening her basket, and clamping a travelling spirit-lamp to the woodwork above the seat. “ Real tea. Not the stewed leaves and water we should pay six annas for outside ! There’s half a dozen of soda, three pints of champagne, a fowl, and an aspic in the ice-box under your seat. But tea would be best now. We’ll keep the rest for your dinners.”

He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

“ You’ve a remarkable talent for spoiling a man ! ”

“ It’s one I’m very proud of,” she answered simply : and leaning out of the open doorway, caught sight of her husband striding down the platform, closely followed by an army of coolies, two bearers, and two pessimistic-looking dogs on chains. “ Theo,” she called, “ do leave that eternal luggage to Amar Singh, and come and be spoilt ! We’re going to have tea.”

Before the train jolted out of the station, she had served it to them in large cups, an insubstantial biscuit in each saucer : for it is drink, not food, that a man wants when the thermometer stands at 110° in the shade.

At Umritsur the train halted for half an hour. The thermometer had not fallen with the sun ; and when the

faint breeze of their going died down, there seemed to be no air left to breathe.

Lenox dined regally out of the ice-box: while Desmond and Honor, silencing his protests by flight, carried off iced soda and a whisky-flask to the frowsy, airless refreshment room, where they wrestled undismayed with curried kid, the ubiquitous chicken cutlet, and two plates of discoloured water,—flavoured with *jharron*,¹—that masqueraded as clear soup. Two quarrelsome Eurasians shared their table. A punkah that may once have been white waggled officiously overhead. But for all that the flies were lords of the meal; and enjoyed it far better than those who paid for it.

“Thank God for my good dinner!” Desmond muttered with a wry face as he put down his money. “*You* must supplement it out of Lenox’s rations, old lady. *Hukm hai . . . sumja?*”²

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. Having won the victory that mattered, she could afford to be submissive over trifles.

An hour or so before midnight, they clanked into Lahore station—a big - bastioned building, whose solid masonry breathed fire, as literally as any dragon of romance. Within was a great darkness, partially dispelled by hanging oil - lamps; and babel enough to wake the Seven Sleepers. The uninitiated arriving at an Indian railway station are apt to imagine that a riot of some sort must be in progress. But it is only the third-class passenger, whose name is legion, fighting, tooth and nail, for the foot of space due to every possessor of the precious morsel of cardboard tucked into the folds of his belt: because he knows, from harsh experience, that when the train moves on more than a few will be left disconsolate, to watch its unwinking eye vanish out of their ken:—bewildered adventurers, for many of whom the “fire-carriage” still remains a new-fangled god, who feeds on coal and water, and can only be propitiated by repeated offerings of that wonder-working hieroglyph—the *tikkut*.

At Lahore passengers to Dera change into the night mail for Mooltan: and almost before the train drew up

¹ Duster.

² It is an order—you understand ?

Desmond was out on the platform, pushing his way, purposefully, through a mass of jostling, shouting, perspiring humanity:—Sikhs, Punjabi farmers, moneylenders, ‘fat and scant of breath,’ women of all ages, with apathetic babies, in round cap and necklace, astride upon their hips. In the station-master’s office he found the fateful red envelope awaiting him: and broke the seal with a shaking hand.

“Crisis over. Condition more hopeful. Will wire Jhung.”

“Thank God!” he muttered, choking down a lump that had risen in his throat. Then, elbowing his way back to where Honor and Lenox stood guard over a disordered pile of luggage, he thrust the paper into her hand.

“We’ll bring him round between us, you and I,” he said, as she looked up; and she nodded contentedly, her eyes deep in his. He could no longer regret having given way to her: and she knew it!

They were not the only English passengers in the Mooltan train. Two Dera subalterns, who had fled post-haste from Simla, stood smoking outside their carriage:—Hodson, the ‘slacker’ of the Battery, a small sallow individual, with heavy-lidded eyes, and a disagreeable mouth; and Major Olliver’s ‘sub,’ Bobby Nixon, who answered indiscriminately to half a dozen names, but was officially registered as The Chicken, a tribute to his cheerful lack of wisdom, worldly or otherworldly, and to the sparse crop of ‘down’ that surmounted an extensive freckled face, and shadowed a mouth whose one beauty lay in its readiness to smile capacious upon the world at large.

As Honor and Lenox came towards him, the said mouth screwed itself into a low whistle.

“Great Scott, Mrs Desmond, . . . but this is flagrant heroism! Who’d have dreamt of meeting *you* here?”

“A pleasant surprise, I hope,” she asked, smiling, as they shook hands.

“Why, of course it’s always good to see you,” the boy answered, looking upon her with frank admiration. “And

you bet we're proud to have our ladies facing the music with us. But still . . cholera's cholera; and it looks like a record year. They've got it hot and strong at Mian Mir. Two of the Norfolks came down the hill with us, swearing like Billy O. Been up less than a fortnight; and there's a masked ball on at the Club to-morrow. Oh Lord, it's a lively country! Poor old Hodson only got a week in Simla; and he has fever on him still."

Lenox glanced quizzically at the man he desired to weed out of his beloved Battery by the simple means of making him work.

"Hard luck," he remarked; a suspicion of irony in his tone. And Hodson, anathematising under his breath India in general, and the Frontier in particular, strolled off down the platform, head in air. There was little love lost between him and a commandant for whom work was the backbone of life.

Just then, through the open windows of the next carriage, there came forth a voice of thunder—articulate, unparliamentary thunder: and Lenox, with a touch of friendly authority, drew Honor farther away.

"That's old Buckstick," Bobby explained genially. "Giving it to his poor devil of a bearer, because he wants to hit out at some one. They say in the regiment that some fool of a palmist told him to beware of cholera; and I believe the old chap's in a blue funk. Queer thing, funk. Put that man on an unbroken horse, or in the thick of a hand-to-hand scrimmage, and he wouldn't know the meaning of fear. Yet now . . ."

His dissertation was interrupted by the appearance at the window of Colonel Stanham Buckley of the Punjab Infantry, who mopped a moist bald head, and inquired picturesquely of a passing official when the blank this blankety blank train was supposed to start. Then catching sight of a woman's figure, he vanished, with a final incoherent explosion, slamming up the window-shutter behind him.

How the devil, he asked himself furiously, should a sane man expect to find an Englishwoman hanging about Lahore station on a murderous night of July? The idea that she might be travelling to Dera never entered his

head. His own wife, after five years of Frontier vicissitudes,—aggravated by debt, and the tyrauny of 'little drinks at mess,'—had developed pronounced views on the duties of motherhood. These had led to a house in Surrey, which, for one reason or another, it had never yet seemed feasible to give up: and Buckley had consoled himself after the fashion of his kind, with hard drinking, hard riding, and hard swearing,—the only form of Trinity recognised by a certain type of man.

And as he opened his ice-box, and helped himself to a stiff 'nightcap' before turning in, Desmond joined the group outside.

"Come on, you two," he said, grasping an arm of each. "Dogs and luggage, and carriage all square. We shall be off in a minute. Only half an hour behind time! See you again at Chichawutni, Nick. Don't lie too flat, and get apoplexy. We can't afford to lose willing men!"

They met again, all six of them, on the Chichawutni platform, in a dry hot dawn; for they were nearing the desolation of the Sindh Sagar desert, where the monsoon is a negligible quantity. Lenox, who had neither slept nor smoked all night, looked rather more rugged than usual in the clear light; but otherwise seemed to be bearing the journey well. 'Old Buckstick,' as he had been christened by irreverent juniors, raised his hat to Honor from a distance; and wondered what the hell women of that sort were made of.

Early breakfast over, they set out upon a six hours' tonga drive to Jhung; an isolated civil station fifty miles off the line of rail. Tortured India was already awake and astir; and along an interminable road of fine white dust, covered with straw, they sped at a hand-gallop between converging lines of sheesham-trees, with clank and rattle and incessant tooting of horns, scattering the unhurried traffic of the open road:—a procession of five tongas loaded to the limit of allowance with human beings, dogs, saddles, and battered boxes. In all directions the unprofitable land rolled level to the sky-line. Every seven or eight miles they stopped to change ponies. Every hour the heat and glare grew fiercer; the clangour of wheels and tonga-bar more assertive, till it seemed to

beat on bared nerves; and the terrible thirst of the Frontier took hold upon the dust-filled throats of dog and man alike.

It is possible to compress a good deal of discomfort into six hours: and the Dak Bungalow, in its noonday quiet and comparative coolness, seemed an Island of the Blest after the glare and riot of the road. Here the Desmonds were cheered by a reassuring telegram; and here all rested till after sundown, when the pitiless tongas claimed them again; and all night long they fled across the open desert over a track of straw, through an interminable darkness strewn with stars.

Now and again a handful of these, seemingly dropped to earth, heralded a changing station, and a halt for fresh ponies. Here would be brief and blessed respite; a moment to stretch cramped limbs: moving lights that revealed shadowy shapes of men and horses: much apostrophising of the Prophet, interspersed with questionable jokes and laughter: and the voice of the pariah, roused from light sleep, or the absorbing pursuit of fleas. Here also Colonel Buckley would wake up, and confound creation in smothered expletives, mindful of Honor's presence; and on one occasion Hodson was heard confiding to the Chicken his determination to 'get quit of this blasted Frontier' on the first opportunity. Whereat Lenox lost his apathy, and turned upon Desmond, who walked beside him.

"Listen to that now! By Jove, he shall get his opportunity sooner than he thinks for. We can't have young skrimshankers of his kidney patronising the finest service in India."

"Get Richardson to give him a taste of the swimming-bath, in his mess kit, when the cold weather comes!" Desmond suggested with a laugh. "I've known that knock the nonsense out of some of 'em."

Lenox nodded thoughtfully.

"I'm not over-partial to that form of argument," said he. "But in this case, I believe I should rather enjoy it."

Then the voice of the driver requested the Heaven-borns to return to their seats: and they were off again, full clatter, half a dozen pariahs speeding their progress.

Honor, by her own choice, shared the back seat with her husband in comparative comfort. His enclosing arm shielded her, as far as might be, from the incessant jolting; and from time to time, in utter weariness, her head sank upon his shoulder, and she slept, while the two men smoked and talked fitfully in undertones.

Such primitive journeyings are fast becoming obsolete in the India of to-day, where the railway stretches its antennæ in all directions, and the horn of the motor has been heard beyond Chaman. Yet, for all their obvious discomforts, they possessed their own peculiar flavour of interest and charm.

Dawn showed them the Indus at last: a sheet of tarnished silver, five miles wide, sprawling over the colourless country, its normal banks submerged by the rush of water from the hills: and behind them day sprang out of the east, 'a tyrant with a flaming sword.'

Through eight blazing hours that sword hung bared above them. For their ferry-boat was a native barge, persuaded rather than propelled in any given direction by oars as long as punt poles; and set with one unwieldy sail that could neither be tacked nor furled; but which provided them, for a time, with a patch of burning shadow, by no means to be despised. In it they smoked and picnicked, and made merry with cards and dogs, to the best of their ability; while erratic currents bore them from sandbank to sandbank; each collision involving an interlude of shouting, shoving, coaxing, and upbraiding on the part of four assiduous boatmen; and when, by the mercy of God and the river, they managed to run aground on the farther side, it was nearing four o'clock in the afternoon.

Here were more tongas awaiting their prey: and this time the travellers hailed them gratefully: for the swollen river had almost invaded the gardens of outlying bungalows; and a short gallop brought them at last into the straggling station, whose name literally signifies the Tents of Ishmael. But the day of tents had long since given place to the day of spacious, square-shouldered bungalows, with pillared verandahs, set in the midst of rambling compounds, where the ferasch and banana flourished

in dusty luxuriance, while orange, pomegranate, hibiscus, and poinsettia,—to say nothing of marigolds and roses,—blazed regally in the blossoming season with scarlet, and crimson gold. A bird's-eye view of the station itself might have suggested to the imaginative eye a game of noughts and crosses scratched on a Titanic slate:—a network of wide white roads, unrelieved by curve or undulation; their rigidity emphasised by equidistant lines of trees, and whitewashed gate-posts, innocent of gates.

Into one of these openings three out of the five tongas finally clattered and stood still; and a familiar brogue gave them greeting from the verandah.

“Praise the Powers, ye've got here at last! We'd begun to think you might be setting up house on a sandbank for the night!”

“We've had our fill of 'em without that, Frank,” Desmond answered as he sprang from his seat.

For the voice was the voice of Mrs Olliver, a rough-cut Irishwoman, whose short reddish curls, and masculinity of speech and manner, cloaked the woman's heart that glowed deep down in her,—a jewel crusted with common clay. Beside her stood Max Richardson, and Colonel Meredith—a big, broad-shouldered man, extraordinarily like his sister in face and temperament—who cleared the steps like any subaltern, lifted Honor out of the tonga, and kissed her on both cheeks.

“You've no earthly business to be here, you know,” he reprimanded her by way of greeting. “I'll tell Theo what I think of him, when I get him alone!”

“No, please, John, you mustn't,” she entreated in a low tone. “He did his best to prevent me. But I meant to come . . . and I came!”

“I thought as much, when I got his wire!” Then, still keeping hold of her, he shook hands with Desmond. “Mighty glad to get you back, Theo: and to see you looking so fit. You'll find your work cut out, I promise you.”

“So much the better. Any cases?”

“Not yet, thank God. We must steer clear of camp, if the thing can be done. But the fever's bad enough. They're dropping like flies in the city, poor devils. Our

hospital's crammed; and two 'subs' on the sick-list as well as Wyndham. He's going on all right now; but goodness knows when he'll be fit for duty."

"I want to see Mackay about getting him over here as soon as possible. May I borrow Suliman, and ride round at once?"

"When you've got outside a fair allowance of tea and sandwiches. Not a minute sooner!"

"Tea? Rather not. But I'd sell my immortal soul for an iced peg!"

While they talked, Max Richardson had led his friend into the lofty shadowed drawing-room, that, in spite of a thermometer at 96°, struck cool as a grotto after the furnace without: and Frank Olliver, consigning Honor to the largest arm-chair, herself presided at the tray; apologising, in characteristic fashion, for having temporarily 'taken over charge.'

"But bossing the show's one of me few talents; an' I'm not for wrapping it in a napkin. Geoff swears I took over charge of creation before I'd cut me first tooth! Any way it struck me that perhaps in the hustle of starting you'd not thought of sending full instructions; so I just came over this morning, and made free with your linen cupboard, an' your bazaar account. For I know how it feels to come back to a dead house at this time of year.—Lord, there's that Theo man off again; incarnate whirlwind that he is! He'll get Major Wyndham over here to-morrow, sure as fate; though the good man refused *my* pressing invitation a week ago. And 'tis the first time one o' me own brother officers has denied me the only kind o' Woman's Rights this child's ever likely to clamour for!"

"Hear, hear, Mrs Olliver!" Meredith and Richardson applauded her, as she held out both hands for their tea-cups; and Lenox smiled amused approval from the depths of his chair.

When Desmond returned an hour later, he found Lenox's luggage in the verandah, awaiting removal, and Lenox himself sitting alone in the drawing-room with Brutus and his pipe. It rested on his knee, held in place by the finger-tips emerging from his sling; and as

Desmond entered he was scientifically pressing its contents into place with the ball of his thumb.

Impulsively the other hurried forward, and laid an arresting hand on his arm.

"Not that again, surely, old chap," he said, a note of anxiety in his voice. "Do you quite realise how many times you have filled it in the last thirty-six hours?"

Lenox's fingers closed like a vice upon his treasure.

"Can't say I've troubled to keep count," he answered in a hard voice. "And I'm damned if I can see what right you have to take me to task about it."

"Not a shadow of right," Desmond owned frankly. "Except that I care immensely what comes to you, and to that plucky wife of yours who has honoured me with her friendship; and whom I am hoping to welcome here—as Mrs Lenox before many months are out."

The shot took effect. With a listless movement Lenox let his fingers fall apart; and the pipe rolled on to the rug at his feet. Here Brutus lazily investigated it as a possible treasure trove; and after a puzzled sniff or two lifted inquiring ears to his master, who was looking absently in another direction.

Then Desmond stooped, and picked it up.

"Will you let me empty it, and fill it from my own pouch?" he asked quietly: and Lenox gave silent assent.

"No doubt I seem to be a contemptible brute enough," he added bitterly, while the transfer of tobaccos was in progress. "And no doubt you're not far wrong either. But if you could get inside my head for a few hours, you might possibly understand."

"My dear Lenox, it is just because I understand that I'm keen to do what little I can for you, even at the risk of being damned for officiousness! If your head's giving you trouble, why not take a genuine dose of the stuff last thing; and get a night of solid rest before you start work? That seems to me safer than trifling with poison in the form of tobacco. You know yourself you'd make a square stand against the naked drug. It's the little 'nips,' the small capitulations, that do the damage in the long-run."

He held out the pipe: and Lenox, clenching his teeth upon it, proceeded to set it alight.

"Say what you please about things in future, Desmond."

He spoke without removing his eyes from the match he was manipulating. "I swear I won't take it amiss again." Then he rose abruptly. "But I must be off now. I only waited to see you, and—thank you before leaving. You've the knack of putting fresh heart into a fellow when he feels played out."

Desmond eyed the man thoughtfully for a second before replying. Every line of him proclaimed utter weariness of soul and body.

"Anything ready for you over there?" said he.

"Not that I know of. But Zyarulla will shake things down in no time."

"All the same, as your luggage is handy, why not stop on here? You'd be uncommonly welcome; and I know Honor would be glad to keep an eye on you for a while longer."

The invitation, given on the spur of the moment, took Lenox aback.

"But, my good chap, . . . you've got Wyndham coming over."

"Yes. Thank God. To-morrow or next day. No distaste for Paul's company, have you?"

Lenox smiled, and shook his head.

"Hang it all, Desmond, you know what I mean. You and your wife have done too much for me already. There are limits to a man's capacity for sponging on other folks' generosity."

"Well, if that's your only objection, we'll consider the matter settled! Wyndham goes into my dressing-room; so the boy's nursery is at your service. My wife is never so happy as when she has her hands full; and it'll be less trying for you here, than in your own empty bungalow."

The last words flashed a suspicion into Lenox's mind.

"Look here, man," he broke out hotly, his eyes searching Desmond's face. "Isn't it you yourself who would be glad to keep an eye on me? You're half afraid I shall knock under to this infernal thing if I'm too much alone. Is that it?"

Desmond met question and glance four-square.

"You gave me leave just now not to mince matters,

and I take you at your word," said he. "To acknowledge that living alone may make the fight harder for you is no reflection on your powers of resistance. It is simple fact; and no earthly good can come of disregarding it. In your case discretion is the better part of valour.—Now, will you be reasonable, and accept my suggestion in the spirit in which it was made?"

He held out his hand. Lenox grasped, and wrung it hard.

"Thanks, old chap," he said. "I'll stay for the present. There's no notwithstanding you two."

That night he excused himself from mess: and long after the house and compound had fallen asleep, he and Desmond sat together in the *dufta*, with pipes and pegs, and softly snoring dogs at their feet, talking intermittently of all things in earth and heaven, with the rare unreserve bred of tobacco, and the communicative influence of midnight. Talk of this kind draws men very close together; and in the course of it Lenox discovered—as others had done before him—that this man who had become so intimately linked with the vital issues of his life was no mere good comrade, but a dynamic force, challenging and evoking the manhood of his friends.

When they parted Lenox felt more hopeful than he had done since the arrival of Quita's note; and honest sleep hung heavy on his eyelids.

"Don't believe you need the dose we spoke of after all," Desmond remarked on a note of satisfaction.

"Not a bit of it. Thanks to you, I believe I shall sleep like a top."

Nor was he disappointed.

For the first time in fifty-six hours he took his fill of natural dreamless sleep: and, on waking next morning, the first sight that greeted him was a letter from Dalhousie, propped against the milk-jug on his early tea tray.

CHAPTER XIX.

"And methought that beauty and terror were only one, not two ;
And the world has room for love and death, and thunder and dew ;
And all the sinews of Hell slumber in summer air ;
And the face of God is a rock ; but the face of the rock is fair."

—R. L. S.

THAT same evening after sunset, a hospital doolie was set down in the verandah, and from it emerged Paul Wyndham—a long lean figure of a man, whose most notable features were deep steadfast eyes, neither blue nor grey ; a mouth of extraordinary gentleness and capacity for endurance ; and the grave quietness of movement and speech, that may mean power in perfect equilibrium or mere dulness.

Desmond and Honor welcomed him with unconcealed affection ; and for himself, his descent into the Valley of the Shadow seemed a small price to pay for a convalescence cheered by the ministrations of these two, than whom there were none dearer to him on earth. Of the unalterable nature of his feeling for Honor, both husband and wife were well aware ; though no word of it ever passed their lips. They were aware, also, that the love of a man like Paul Wyndham was a thing apart ; implying neither disloyalty to his friend, nor the remotest danger to any of the three concerned. Conditions inconceivable to the pedestrian order of mind.

Too weak to fret against enforced inaction at a time of stress, Wyndham passed his days between sleeping and waking and eating ; between rare talks with Lenox and Desmond, and the restfulness diffused through heart and brain and body by Honor's constant presence at his bedside. She had amply fulfilled the promise given him more than four years ago of close and privileged friendship ; and he counted himself more blest in its possession than many a man who wins the entire woman, to find her no more than a plaster goddess after all.

Honor herself, apart from the natural woman's pleasure in nursing an appreciative patient, was thankful for a definite demand upon her time. For Theo was seldom

available now, except for an occasional after-dinner drive, through darkness two degrees cooler than high noon; and beneath her surface serenity she suffered keenly from the ache of empty arms; from the completeness of separation involved in leaving a child too young to span distance even by hieroglyphs, profusely decorated with 'kisses,' such as she had seen women treasure in the days of her young ignorance. Mrs Rivers wrote constantly and copiously. But can the most unwearied pen set down all that a mother craves to know about her child?

At the end of a week, Lenox was with them still. To his sole suggestion of departure, Desmond had merely replied: "My dear man, don't talk nonsense. When we've had enough of you, we'll let you know it, without ceremony!" And Lenox, strangely loth to return to his bachelor quarters, took him at his word, and stayed on.

Yet the two men saw little enough of one another. For on the Frontier work means work: and when cholera hovers over the station like a bird of prey, it is carried on with redoubled vigour. Only by constant occupation can fear and fatalism be held at arm's-length. Only the infectious mettle of the British officer can infuse into all ranks that cheerful alertness which, at a time of epidemic, is the finest safeguard in the world. There is much virtue, also, in mere routine, one of the wingless good angels of earth; and only those who have proved its power to drag broken heart or broken body through the things that must be done, estimate it at its true value.

In Lenox's case, it helped to deaden the prick of anxiety as to the future and the physical ache of longing; for as Commandant with two out of four subalterns on the 'sick list,' he had his hands full; and Desmond, the Colonel's chosen friend and ally in all regimental matters, was in the same enviable condition. The more so, since he and Meredith between them had anticipated the modern theory that the spread of cholera or fever can be partially checked by a determined assault on flies and mosquitoes, the great disease-breeders of the East; a suggestion received at that time with a mild amusement, bordering on scorn. But the two men, zealous for the credit and

welfare of the regiment—the Great Fetish ‘that claims the lives of all and lives for ever’—determined to give the new notion a fair trial in their own Lines; and Desmond, as may be supposed, flung himself heart and soul into the organisation of this very novel form of campaign! Plunged neck-deep again in the work he loved, there seemed no limit to his tireless energy; and from the Colonel downward, all were heartily glad to get him back.

Even in an age given over to the marketable commodity, England can still breed men of this calibre. Not perhaps in her cities, where individual aspiration and character are cramped, warped, deadened by the brute force of money, the complex mechanism of modern life: but in unconsidered corners of her Empire, in the vast spaces and comparative isolation, where old-fashioned patriotism takes the place of parochial party politics, and where, alone, strong natures can grow up in their own way.

It is to the Desmonds and Merediths of an earlier day that we are indebted for the sturdy loyalty of our Punjab and Frontier troops, for our hold upon the fighting races of the North. India may have been won by the sword, but it has been held mainly by attributes of heart and spirit; by individual strength of purpose, capacity for sympathy and devotion to the interests of those we govern. When we fail in these, and not till then, will power pass out of our hands.

That there was no such failure among the little band of Englishmen throughout that inglorious campaign against an enemy one could never have the satisfaction of thrashing in the open, the attitude of their Native officers and men bore ample witness. Light-hearted subalterns—whisked away from half-fledged love affairs, or the more serious business of sport—might curse their luck with blasphemous vigour; older men might grumble openly at extra parades, at the strain of additional vigilance and discipline; but for all that, the work was done,—thoroughly, and with a will; not within the station only, but out there on the open plain, rolling in vast undulations to the naked spurs of the Suliman range, where the

sun smote through the canvas as if it had been so much brown paper, and the stricken regiment strove, by constantly shifting ground, to shake off the pursuing horror that steadily thinned its ranks. Here Colonel Stanham Buckley waked each morning with the cold clutch of fear at his heart; fortified himself with incessant 'nips' throughout the day; and left the bulk of the work to a cheery little Adjutant, untroubled by the sorrowful great gift of imagination. And here, as in the station, all officers were diligent in visits to the hospital; heartening the sufferers by their presence, and combating, as far as might be, the Oriental's fatalistic attitude towards disease and death. Perhaps only those who have had close dealings with the British officer in time of action or emergency realise, to the full, the effective qualities hidden under a careless or conventional exterior:—the vital force, the pluck, endurance, and irrepressible spirit of enterprise, which—it has been aptly said—make him, at his best, the most romantic figure of our modern time.

And while indefatigable soldiers fought the enemy in camp and in the Lines, Dudley Norton, C.S.I., Deputy Commissioner, and ruler-in-chief of the station, fought him no less energetically in the bazaar and native city; an even more heart-breaking task. For here was no disciplined body of men, but a swarm of prejudiced individuals, caring nothing for infection, and everything for the sanctity of house and caste. Precautions and sanitary measures had to be carried at the point of the bayonet; and they were so carried. For Dudley Norton, no novice at Frontier work, had long since made himself wholesomely feared and respected throughout the Derajat; while, among the Maliks of his district, his hawk-like eyes gleaming under heavy brows were accredited with the power of watching a man's thoughts at their birth. A reputation too useful to be discouraged!

Like all detached Frontier civilians, he practically lived at the station mess; except on fugitive occasions, when a placidly handsome woman, bearing his name, vouchsafed him a flying visit from home; for no other reason—said the evil-minded—than to establish a right-of-way over her property. At these times Norton welcomed, and

entertained his wife with a scrupulous politeness and concern for her physical well-being that was a tragedy in itself; and eventually 'saw her off' at the nearest railway station with a sigh of relief. For, once—in a former life, it seemed—he had been in love with her; and the ghost of a dead passion is an ill companion at bed and board. At the present moment, he had seen neither her nor his only son for more than five years; and of the small daughter, whose coming had transfigured his life, there remained only a cross in Kohat cemetery, and a faded photo of the flagrantly unnatural type that prevailed in the late 'seventies. But the man who gives his heart to the Indian Borderland must steel himself to forgo much that, in the arrogance of youth, he has deemed indispensable to happiness, or even to living at all.

Frontier service begets closer contact between soldier and civilian, both in work and play, than cantonment life down country; most often to the uprooting of prejudice on both sides; and Norton was one of the few men in the station who had achieved comparative intimacy with Lenox. Those formidable eyes of his had been quick to detect in the taciturn Gunner, who had done so much, and had so little to say about it, a coming 'political' of no mean quality, a man of ideas and ambitions, for whom the great country of his service was something more than a vast playground, or shooting-box; in effect, a man after his own heart.

Thus, finding Lenox established at the Desmonds, Norton called upon them soon after Honor's arrival. He was rewarded by a standing invitation to 'drop in' any afternoon, or evening that he happened to be free, an invitation which Honor extended to most of the men who came to bid her welcome; and tea at the Desmonds—with iced coffee or pegs as alternatives, and smoking a matter of course—soon became a daily institution; a respite, if only for an hour or two, from the monotony of mess, parade-ground, and hospital.

"Awfully sporting of Mrs Desmond," was the verdict of grateful subalterns, who found these tea-drinkings a vast improvement on stale home papers, and half-hearted

gambling at the Club. There was always music. Honor, besides playing magnificently, could be safely relied upon for impromptu accompaniments. The Chicken, and an irrepressible Irishman of the Sikhs, who gloried in the name of O'Flanagan, were indefatigable on the banjo, and in the construction of topical verses to vary the programme. Hot-weather audiences are not hypercritical; and in the red-hot circle of days and nights the mildest innovation is welcome as a sail on a blank horizon.

Desmond himself was delighted with his wife's spontaneous contribution to the good spirits of the station; and if the two had little quiet time together, they had at least a satisfying sense of comradeship in work; the strongest link that can be added to the strong chain of marriage.

Frank Olliver, with her big smile, and infectious gaiety, looked in most days, as a matter of course; till one of the two fever cases she had managed to lay hands on took a serious turn, and an hour off duty could only be secured when Honor insisted on relieving guard, and sending Frank over to play hostess in her stead.

There was also little Mrs Peters, the only other wife in the station; a square, shapeless cushion of a woman, who would rush in for a breathless half-hour to pour tales of native cunning, and Eurasian apathy into Desmond's sympathetic ears. Being both plump and energetic, she suffered cruelly in the heat; mopped her face without shame between her sentences; and, according to Frank Olliver, lived chiefly on lime-squash, and a limitless admiration for her missionary husband,—a large, ungainly man, with the manners of a shy schoolboy, and the wrapt gaze of a seer; a man who, in an age of fanaticism, would have walked smiling to the rack. As it was, he walked with no less equanimity through the pestilential mazes of the city and bazaar. For although in this age of tolerance run to seed, a man is not called upon to die for his beliefs, he is occasionally called upon to live for them; which is not necessarily the easier of the two. But up to his lights Henry Peters achieved it. At all possible and impossible hours, his unwieldy white umbrella, pith hat, and badly-cut drill suit pervaded the

dwellings of his scattered converts; while his wife, torn between pride in him and mortal dread of infection, grieved in secret over inadequate meals snatched at odd hours; and supplemented tremulous prayers for his safety with lumps of camphor, screwed up in paper, and slipped surreptitiously into the pockets of his coats.

Once or twice she dragged him in triumph to the Desmonds,—a reluctant dishevelled hero,—and ‘showed him off’ to that little company of well-groomed, kindly-natured soldiers, with a naïve simplicity that went to Honor’s heart.

“Why is it that some of us have a special licence to be so exquisitely natural?” she wondered, as she stood beside the tea-table, dispensing iced coffee, and surveying, with satisfaction, a room full of tobacco-smoke and contented men. “That’s just how I feel tempted to ‘show off’ Theo, sometimes. And wouldn’t the dear man crush me to powder if I tried !”

She glanced approvingly at him where he sat astride on a reversed chair, in dusty polo kit, reporting progress of the great ‘fly campaign’ to Wyndham, who had been newly promoted to a deck-lounge in the drawing-room at tea-time.

It was a larger gathering than usual; and, in spite of the fact that for three days the thermometer had recorded a hundred and twenty in the shade, spirits ran high. The subalterns—for whose exuberant fooling Honor had a very tender tolerance—had ‘chorussed’ themselves hoarse and thirsty; and were receiving the reward of the public-spirited out of long misty tumblers, that fizzed and bubbled. Peters had forgotten his shyness in a discussion with Norton on the vexed question of cholera infection, and the probable futility of quarantine; while Mrs Peters, listening anxiously, made inconsequent darts into the argument, to her husband’s obvious discomfiture, and Norton’s equally obvious amusement.

A group of men near Honor were talking of England, tormenting themselves gratuitously by bare imagination of a feast. Captain Unwin of the Sikhs was casually unfolding a plan to elude superfluous creditors, and spend next summer ‘at home.’ His debts were phenomenal;

and it was six years since he had sighted the funnel of a steamer. He expatiated yearningly on prospective delights. Cup Day at Ascot ; a July evening on the upper reaches of the Thames ; a punt in a backwater ; a pipe and a cushion ; just enough breeze to stir the willows ; and, with any luck, a pretty woman in the bows.

"Just a shade better than a sandbank on the Indus, eh ?" he wound up with a chuckle of enjoyment. "And I'll pull it through this time or perish in the attempt ! Lord . . . think of jingling down Piccadilly in a hansom once again . . ."

"To dinner at the Savoy," suggested a thick-set Major on a note of relish. "Devilish good one they gave me there three years ago. Night before I sailed."

Sympathetic murmurs encouraged him to enlarge on the cherished memory ; but before he had reached the *entrée*—an elaborate item—Honor was out of hearing ; having crossed the room to where Lenox sat balancing a coffee-cup on one knee, watching the faces round him with keen, kindly eyes, and taking little active part in the proceedings. He still wore his arm in a sling ; and his teeth held the inevitable pipe, filled from a tin of tobacco that Desmond had induced him to accept on the night of their talk. Only three times in the past week had he succumbed to the forbidden mixture. But the glow of satisfaction, which those who have never resisted unto blood, complacently couple with self-conquest, was denied him. Restlessness, lack of sleep, constant recurrence of the concussion headache,—these had been his reward ; with the result that a rising temperature had forced him to put his name on the 'sick-list' and take a few days off duty. But at Honor's approach his whole face lit up. The intimacy of everyday life had drawn them very near to each other ; for Honor had all the magnetism of a woman made for tenderness ; a magnetism few men can resist, and few women condone.

"You look so tired, and aloof from it all," she said gently. "I'm afraid the boys' nonsense and noisiness worries your head."

"Not a bit of it. It's good to see them enjoying themselves. You're a public benefactor, Mrs Desmond."

She laughed, and blushed.

"Nonsense. It's only so nice of them to come, when one can do so little to amuse them. Do have some more coffee."

"Thanks. It's capital stuff. Dick's very late," he added anxiously. "I'm wondering what's come to him."

He rose, and followed her to the tea-table, where Bobby Nixon saluted with his most expansive smile; and announced that O'Flanagan, reinforced by refreshment, was once more 'willing to oblige.'

An assurance that the rest were unanimously willing to listen brought the Irishman to his feet, banjo in hand; a lank, clean-shaven individual, who secreted a well-spring of humour beneath the tragic-comic solemnity of the born-low comedian. He was greeted with cries of "Fire away, old Flannel Jacket!" "Phil the Fluter's Ball!" "An' give ut in shtyle!" He gave it in style accordingly, and in a brogue as broad as his own shoulders; the whole room spontaneously taking up the chorus.

"Wid the toot of the flute, an' the twiddle of the fiddle,
Dancin' in the middle, like a herring on a griddle!
Up an' down, hands come round, cross into the wall—
Faith, hadn't we the gaietee . . ."

But at this point the door opened to admit Max Richardson. He was still in uniform; and there was that in his face which checked their hilarity, and made O'Flanagan instantly put down his banjo.

Honor went quickly towards him, holding out her hand.

"What is it?" she asked in a low tone.

"It's young Hodson. He died . . . half an hour ago."

"Not cholera?"

Dick nodded.

An inarticulate murmur went round the room; and for several seconds no one spoke. The first white man down seemed to bring the enemy within striking distance of each one of them.

Then Lenox came forward. "You'll excuse us, Mrs Desmond?" he said quietly. And the two men went out, leaving a strangely silent room behind them.

They passed through the hall into the dining-room before Lenox took the pipe from his lips, and spoke.

"Bad business," he remarked laconically. "And, God forgive me, when he 'went sick' this morning I half thought he was malingering. Poor chap . . . he's quit of the Frontier sooner than he thought for, without any help from me. You were with him, I suppose, . . . at the last?"

"Yes; for the best part of two hours," Dick answered, absently helping himself to a cheroot. "Never saw a man take it harder. No getting him to make a fight for it. Kept on begging me to tell him if this show was a fellow's only chance; and . . . I couldn't."

Lenox looked intently at his friend.

"That so?"

The other nodded; and there was a short silence. Richardson took up a photograph of old Sir John Meredith, and examined it with critical interest.

"You might have sent for Peters," Lenox said at length.

"No earthly use. He swore like a trooper when I suggested it; and I can't blame him. Professional platitudes are not the style of physic to ease a man when he's suffering hell's own torments in his mind and body." He set down the picture abruptly, and swung round on his heel. "I'll be going on now, for a tub, and a change of clothing. Idiotic of me, no doubt; but I feel a bit off colour after all that. How about the funeral? Tonight?"

"No. First thing to-morrow. I'll arrange it with Peters before he leaves; and get Courtenay to let me off the sick-list, if I can." Then grasping the younger man's shoulder with rough kindness, he added: "Good old Dick. Pull yourself together, and come back here for dinner. It may be my turn . . . or yours, before we're through. And if it is . . . we don't go out like snuffed candles, remember. You may take my word for it."

"Hope to God you're right," the other answered between his teeth, and was gone.

Next morning, in a flaming dawn, all that remained of

Tom Hodson was consigned, with military honours, to the dust of that Frontier he had grown to hate, because it demands so much of a man, and offers so little in return ; and every house within earshot of the cemetery vibrated to the three parting volleys fired over the open grave.

Lenox was present at the service ; and at the gun practice that followed shortly after it. Thirty grains of phenacetin and several forbidden pipes, had ensured him six hours' sleep, and a cooler skin ; with the result that he had successfully induced an amused medical officer to report him ' fit for duty.' But Nature is relentless ; and Lenox, driving back from ' orderly room ' through a white-hot glare, and a haze of pungent dust, found himself speculating vaguely—as though the question concerned some unknown entity in another world—how he was going to drag a protesting body and brain through the rest of the day's work.

"Got to be done somehow, though. That's flat," was his final verdict as he passed into the twilight of the hall.

Every door in the house was shut against the furnace without ; had been shut since seven of the morning ; and would so remain till after sunset. Yet, the mercury hovered between ninety - seven and a hundred all day, and most of the night. In India the thermometer supersedes the barometer ; and in the hot weather it becomes an obsession. There is always a mild satisfaction in knowing exactly what one has endured.

Desmond was not yet back, and the study was empty ; a friendly-looking room, its simple haphazard furniture unified by the rich colour harmonies of Indian carpets and curtains ; while a liberal supply of books, unusual for the country, proclaimed it the room of a soldier who found time for study and thought.

Too weary to get out of uniform, Lenox laid aside his helmet and accoutrements ; shouted to the punkah coolie, sleeping in the verandah, chin on chest ; sorted his geographical papers, and sat down to the table. Then he took out his pipe, eyed it thoughtfully, and flung it aside with a curse. Each relapse resulted in a renewed access of self-distrust ; and this morning the cloud upon his spirit fell heavier than ever, because he foresaw that if the

work ahead of him were to be pulled through, in the teeth of the grinding headaches consequent on his fall, last night's programme must be repeated, not once, but many times. And at that rate, what was to be the end of it? The degradation of submitting to the drug itself? A thousand times, no. The soldier in him sprang to arms at the mere suggestion. Like all men capable of greatness, he believed, not in the mastery of circumstance, but in the mastery of will. Yet, unhappily, the will, like all spiritual forces, is ignominiously dependent on bodily conditions. Pain, sheer pitiless pain, will have its way with the bravest of us.

The man was ill without realising it. The nerves in his head throbbed to a devil's hornpipe of their own, and mental effort was beyond him. In vain he contracted his heavy brows, and tried to gather up the threads of the chapter he had been working at. Black depression over-powered him, obliterating rational thought. The morning's service haunted him with unnatural persistence, and the half-hour he had spent with Dick in the dead boy's bungalow, looking through his papers—a chaos of bills, mostly unpaid; racing notes; old programmes; and half a dozen envelopes addressed in a girl's unformed hand. On the open blotter, an unfinished letter to a friend in Simla had announced his hope of a speedy exchange down country; his determination not to spend another hot weather 'on this God-forsaken Frontier . . .'

"Poor misguided chap," Lenox mused, not without a tinge of his old contempt. "Now if only *I* could have gone in his place, it would have simplified matters all round."

But he thrust away the thought as morbid and cowardly; and by way of curative drew Quita's last letter out of his breast-pocket. The fact of her love for him still remained a miracle incompletely realised; and she had been right in her belief that he had yet to discover its intensity and depth.

The great noontide silence had already fallen upon house and compound. Outside, brazen earth and brazen sky glared at one another with malignant intensity. Two bullocks lounged under the bananas by the mill wheel

flicking lazy tails when the flies presumed too shamelessly upon their apathy ; and crows, with beaks agape, hopped resignedly from one burning patch of shade to another. Among the verandah roof-beams, three grey squirrels argued, with subdued chitterings, over a kipper's head stolen from a breakfast plate ; and at intervals a piteous wailing came from the servants' quarters, where, as all knew, Nizam Din, kitmutgar, was beating his pretty wife, Miriam Bibi, for the third time that week, because she had grown careless in the matter of covering her face, since the coming of Zyarulla, whose arrogant magnificence had created a flutter in more than one respectable household.

But Quita's letter, written in her 'garden' on a boulder, before breakfast, had transported Lenox many hundred miles away from it all. The chittering of squirrels, and the cries of poor Miriam Bibi entered his ears ; but the spirit of him was back among the mountains ; the scent of warm pine-needles was in his nostrils, the spell of his wife's face and voice upon his heart.

A sudden sense of suffocation dispelled the dream. He found himself breathless, in a bath of perspiration. The punkah had stopped dead. And one must have endured this trifling inconvenience to gauge the significance of those five words.

Lenox straightened himself with an oath. " *Kencho*,¹ . . . you son of a jackal ! " he thundered ; at the same time jerking the punkah frill, an effective means of reanimating the long-suffering punkah coolie, who has a trick of twisting the rope round his arm, that he may jerk it the more easily in his dreams.

But Lenox's vigorous pull merely brought a great length of rope through the wall ; and his command was answered by the groans of a man in torment. Springing up, he wrenched open the glass door ; and a blast as from a furnace struck him across the face. The coolie, a brown, distorted mass, writhed upon the hot stones in mortal agony. At the Sahib's approach, he struggled to his knees with a rush of incoherent detail ; while Lenox shouted for Zyarulla, and the dogcart ; flung a word of

¹ Pull.

encouragement to the stricken man, and went in again for his helmet.

Till the trap appeared Lenox paced the verandah; the punkah coolie groaned; and Zyarulla protested as openly as he dared against his Sahib being put to personal inconvenience for a base-born—mere dust of the earth. None the less, at the Sahib's order he gingerly helped the dust of the earth into the trap, where Lenox put his one available arm round the writhing body; and the *sais*, who showed small relish for the situation, was ordered to get up and drive from behind. The which he did; leaning over the back seat, and keeping ostentatiously clear of the misbegotten son of a pig who had broken his midday sleep.

In this fashion they journeyed, awkwardly enough, to the temporary cholera hospital; a handful of tents and grass huts on the outskirts of the station. Betwixt the clutches of cramp, and the abject humility of his kind, the coolie slithered from the seat on to the mat; and Lenox had some ado to prevent his falling headlong from the cart. But in due time he was handed over safely to a suave, coffee-coloured hospital assistant, and carried shrieking into a tent crammed with sights unfit to be told; whence he emerged, two hours later, without protest of voice or limb, to swell the intermittent stream of fellow-corpse that flowed from the hospital to the burning ghats or the Mahommedal burial-ground outside the station.

When Lenox staggered back into the hall, dizzy with headache, and half-blinded with glare, he was met by Desmond, who, noticing a slight lurch as he entered, took hold of his arm.

“Zyarulla told me what happened,” he said, a great gentleness in his voice. “Come on to your room, old man. Take a rousing dose of phenacetin, and lie down till tiffin. I'll bring you a lime-squash.”

“Thanks. You are a damned good sort, Desmond. The sun's touched me up, I fancy. I shall be all right in a couple of hours.”

But before two hours were out, Desmond's orderly was speeding through the dust to the Doctor Sahib's house; and Desmond himself had gone hurriedly to his wife's

room, where she too was lying down after her morning's duties. She rose at his coming, holding out both hands. For she read disaster in his eyes.

"Darling, what *has* gone wrong?"

"It's Lenox. He's down with it. Not severe as yet. But there's no mistaking what it is."

Her faint colour—it had grown perceptibly fainter in the past week—left her face.

"Oh, his poor wife! We must send a wire at once."

"I've sent one already, by the orderly who went for Courtenay. Told her she should have news every day, for the present."

"Oh, bless you, Theo! You think of everything!"

"Steady, Honor, steady," he rebuked her gently. "We've got to do a fair share of thinking between us just now. Paul can safely stay on if one isolates that side of the house; and Zyarulla and I can do everything for Lenox between us. As for you, John must give you a bed till we're through."

"But, Theo . . ."

"Be quiet!" he broke in almost roughly; adding on a changed note: "For once in a way, my dearest, you will obey orders without question—or go altogether. Now give me the chlorodyne, and let me get back to poor Lenox. Seems brutal to give him any form of opium after all he's been through. Hullo, there's Richardson shouting outside. He'll be terribly cut up when he knows."

It transpired that Richardson had come over, post-haste, to report three cases among his men; and at sundown the little mountain battery, with its three subalterns and full camp equipment, marched out into the open desert, scornfully overlooked by that Pisgah height of the Frontier, the Takti Suliman, whose square-cut crags were printed in sharp outline upon a stainless sky.

CHAPTER XX.

"Passion has but one cry, one only :—Oh to touch thee, my beloved!"
—OLIVE SCHREINER.

ASIATIC cholera is as capricious as a woman : capricious both as to her choice of victims, and as to the grisly fashion of her wooing. In one mood she will kill at a stroke, like a poisoned arrow ; in another she will play with a tortured body as a cat plays with a mouse. And it was thus that she dealt with Eldred Lenox.

For two days and nights Desmond and the Pathan wrestled against the evil thing, and against that deadly apathy as to the result, which kills more surely than the disease itself. And since the regiment claimed many hours of the Englishman's day, the brunt of the nursing devolved upon Zyarulla, who scorned suggestions of sleep, and appeared to live on pellets of opium, and a hookah, which inhabited the verandah outside his master's room.

There were moments when they were tempted to despair. But they fought on doggedly, and without comment : and as the second night wore towards morning, they knew that they had conquered. The gong at the police station down the road had just clanged three times. Every door and window-slit stood open at their widest ; and through them entered in the familiar, unforgettable smell of the Indian Empire under her yearly baptism of fire ; a smell of dust, and baked brick work, and stale native tobacco. A hand-lamp on the mantelpiece diffused a yellow twilight through the room ; a twilight flavoured with kerosine : and across the twilight the shadow of the punkah flitted, like a whispering ghost.

Zyarulla, crouching at the bedside, slid a cautious knotted hand between the buttons of the sleeping-coat, and laid it lightly on his master's heart. The flutter within was feeble, but regular ; though the face, grey and shrunken almost past recognition, still bore the impress of death.

"God is great," the Pathan muttered into his beard. "The strength of the Heaven-born is as that of mine own hills ; and my Sahib will live. It is enough."

On the farther side of the bed, Desmond, in gauze vest, and belted trousers, mopped his forehead, and drew a long breath. Then, measuring out a tablespoonful of raw-meat soup, he slipped a hand under the dark head on the pillow.

"Lenox, dear chap, drink this, will you?" he said, speaking as persuasively as a mother to a child.

Lenox obeyed automatically. For a mere instant his lids lifted, and recognition gleamed in the eyes that seemed to have retreated half-way into his head. Then, with an incoherent murmur, he settled himself into a more natural attitude of rest; and the two men watching him intently, exchanged a nod of satisfaction.

The Pathan, sitting back on his heels, fumbled at his belt for a pellet of opium.

"He will sleep now, Huzoor, like a day-old babe; and the Presence will sleep also. Since yesterday at this time your Honour hath taken no rest; and there be three hours yet to parade-time."

"Good. We have fought a tough fight, thou and I, and be sure Lenox Sahib will know of thy share in it. Wake me at half-past five."

"Huzoor."

Zyarulla salaamed profoundly; and Desmond, dropping with fatigue, flung himself, even as he was, on to a chair-bed in the adjoining dressing-room, and slept the dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

Before six he was over at Meredith's bungalow, sitting on the edge of his wife's bed, drinking tea with an egg in it,—her own prescription,—and enjoying her delight at his news.

"Good enough, isn't it?" he concluded heartily. "I'll take the telegraph office on my way back."

"And *I'll* come over to breakfast, bag and baggage!"

"Capital. If John agrees."

"Of course he will. He's not such a fidget as *you* are!"

"Glad to hear it; if it means getting you back; and both rooms shall be disinfected to-day. Lord, but it's a weight off my mind!"

And he cantered down to the Lines in such a mood of exaltation as they know who have been privileged to fight for a human life, and win.

Honor got her own way, as she always did ; and half-past nine found her back at her deserted post behind the teapot. Desmond fancied that she looked paler than usual ; that her cheerfulness was veiled by a shadow of constraint. But as Paul was present, enjoying his first normal breakfast, he contented himself with scrutinising her, when her attention seemed to be taken up elsewhere. As a matter of fact, Honor knew precisely how often he looked at her ; and, womanlike, hugged his solicitude to her heart. For there had been moments, in the past two days, when the traitorous thought would obtrude itself that perhaps the child needed her most after all.

Directly the meal was over, she rose, murmuring that she had 'things to see to,' and went out, leaving the men with their cigars. But instead of going to the store cupboard, where the old Khansamah awaited her, armed with his daily *hissab*,¹ she slipped into the drawing-room, sat down at her bureau, and leaned her head on her hand ; honestly hoping that Theo might leave the house without coming to her. For all that, the sound of his elastic step brought a light into her eyes. She did not rise, or look round ; and he came and stood beside her.

"Not quite yourself this morning, old lady ?" he asked. "Anything really wrong ? Fever ? Headache ?"

She caught the note of anxiety, and with a quick turn of her head kissed the fingers resting on her shoulder.

"No, darling ; neither. Don't worry yourself. I'm perfectly well."

"Sure ?"

"Quite sure."

"Good." And he departed, whistling softly ; clear sign that all was well with his world.

But twenty minutes later when Paul came in to look for a strayed pipe, he found Honor, quite oblivious of 'things,' crying quietly behind her hands. He retreated hastily ; but she heard him and looked up.

"Don't go, Paul. I want you."

¹ Account.

No three words in the language could have pierced him with so keen a thrust of happiness.

"Do you mean . . . can I help you?" he asked eagerly. "I felt sure something was wrong."

"Did you? I'm a bad actress! But . . . it's about Baby,—the other Paul," she added, smiling through wet lashes. "I have just had a letter from Mrs Rivers that makes me want to pack my boxes and go straight back to Dalhousie."

"And shall you? Is it serious enough for that?"

"Oh, how *can* one tell?" she cried desperately, her voice breaking on the words. "It mightn't seem serious to you. He has fever, and a touch of dysentery, and terrible fits of crying with his double teeth. Mrs Rivers seems anxious; and of course one thinks . . . of convulsions. It all sounds rather a molehill, doesn't it, after the horrors we have been living in here? And perhaps only a mother would make a mountain out of it. But I think mothers must have God's leave to be foolish . . . sometimes!"

Fresh tears welled up, and she hid her face again. Paul could only wait beside her tongue-tied, half-sitting on the edge of the writing-table, wondering what dear, unfathomable impulse had led her to admit him to the sanctuary of her sorrow; realising, so far as a masculine brain can realise, something of the struggle involved in woman's twofold responsibility—to the man, and to the gift of the man.

It is the eternally old, eternally new tragedy of Anglo-Indian marriage; none the less poignant because it is repeated *ad infinitum*. Love him as she may, it costs more for a wife, and still more for a mother, to stand loyally by her husband in India than the sheltered women of England can conceive. For to read of such contingencies in print, is by no means the same thing as having one's heart of flesh pierced by the sword of division.

"Has Theo heard all this?" Paul hazarded gently. "He went off in such good spirits."

She dried her eyes, and looked up.

"I couldn't spoil it all by telling him. But I thought

it might seem less of a nightmare, if I could tell some one . . . and . . .”

“And I happened to come handy?” he suggested with a rather pathetic smile.

“Oh, Paul, how horrid! It wasn’t that,” she contradicted him hotly. “It was because you are . . . *you*, my boy’s godfather, and my very dear friend. Do you suppose I would have shown my mother-foolishness to any other man of my acquaintance?”

“No. I don’t suppose it,” he answered, looking steadily down into the anxious beauty of her face. “Forgive my much less pardonable foolishness, and let me help you, if that’s possible. Are you really thinking of going?”

“N . . . no. I don’t believe I am. Only . . . for one mad moment, I felt as if *nothing* could hold me back. But children are such elastic creatures; and if I arrived to find him quite frisky and well, think how ashamed I should feel at having deserted Theo, and put him to so much expense for nothing. But I do want to wire at once; though I hardly like sending Theo’s orderly . . .”

“Let me write it for you, and send my man,” he volunteered, catching gratefully at something definite to be done: and taking up a form he prepared to write at her dictation.

“Reply prepaid, please; and addressed to Frank. I shall go straight over there, and stay till I get the answer. I could never keep it up with Theo all day. You saw how badly I did it at breakfast!—What’s that? Some one come?”

Sounds of arrival were followed by an unmistakable Irish voice in the hall; and Honor hurriedly dabbed her eyes.

“Dear Frank, how clever of her! She can drive me over.”

A minute later she was in the room; an angular workmanlike figure, in sun helmet, and the unvarying coat and skirt. It was her one idea of a dress,—drill in summer, tweed in winter. “An’ be all that’s sensible, what more should an ugly woman want?” had been her challenge to a misguided friend, who had suggested higher aspirations. “Tis no manner o’ use to dress up a collection of limbs

and features without symmetry; an' it saves no end of mental wear and tear, to say nothing of rupees, that's badly wanted for polo ponies."

She entered talking; and shook hands talking still.

"The top o' the morning to you both! 'Tis an unholy hour for a visit. But I'm after the loan of a feeding-cup, knowing you've two. That murdering villain of a *messalchi*¹ broke me only one this morning; an' I'm afraid I used 'language' when I saw the corpse, besides threatening to cut the price of a new one out of his pay! '*Memsahib ke kushi*',² he answers, salaaming like a sainted martyr, and taking the wind clean out o' me sails. But I'll wash yours meself; so you needn't fear to lend it." Then, becoming aware of Honor's red eyelids, she broke off short. "Why, Honor, me dear, it's the born fool I am to be chattering like a parrot when you're in trouble, by the looks of it." A glance from one to the other revealed the telegram in Paul's hand. "Great goodness, it's never the child, is it?" she asked with a swift change of tone.

"Yes. Honor has had disturbing news," he answered for her. "She'll tell you about it while I send off this wire."

Honor, who had risen, sank into her chair again as he left the room.

"Read that, dear," she said simply: and while Frank Olliver read, a strange softness stole over her face, blanched and lined by many Frontier hot weathers. Outsiders, who wondered how any man had ever come to fall in love with her, might have wondered less had they chanced to see her then. On reaching the signature, she awkwardly patted Honor's shoulder.

"'Tis just one o' the bad minutes there's no evading, me darlint. The price you've to pay for the high privilege of carrying on the race."

"It seems a big price sometimes . . . in India," Honor answered, not quite steadily. "And it's your one bit of compensation, Frank, that you're spared the wrench of having to live with your heart in two places at once."

At that Frank bit her lip, and stinging tears—an unusual phenomenon—blinded her eyes. But she was

¹ Scullery man.

² As Memsahib pleases.

overstrung by a week of hard nursing; and some childless women never lose the tragic sense of incompleteness, the unacknowledged ache of empty arms.

"Spared? Ah, me dear, you ought to know me better by now," she protested reproachfully. "I've no use at all for cheap comforts o' that kind. What's the sharpest pangs, after all, balanced against . . . the other thing? Lighter than vanity itself; an' you know it. None better. But there . . . I'm clean daft to be talking so at this stage o' the proceedings. It's the happy woman I am, sure enough. Geoff and I are rare good friends. Always have been. But don't you talk to me again about being spared. It's one more than I can stand; an' that's the truth."

Honor took possession of the hand that patted her shoulder,—a square hand, rough with much riding and exposure,—and laid it against her cheek.

"Bless you, Frank," she said softly. "You make me feel quite ashamed of myself. Come and get the feeding-cup; and take me home with you. I've wired to Mrs Rivers; and the answer will come to you. I couldn't tell Theo, till . . . I must."

Frank's smile had the effect of sunshine striking through a shower.

"Saints alive, how you spoil the dear man! But indeed an' I wonder who could help it? Not meself, I'll swear."

Desmond came in very late for tiffin. At Paul's announcement that Honor had gone to Mrs Olliver's till tea-time, he raised his eyebrows without question or comment: then, going over to the mantelpiece, stood contemplating a recent photo of her and the child.

"Did you happen to notice her at breakfast?" he asked abruptly, his eyes on the picture. "She didn't seem to me quite up to the mark. And of course . . . bringing her into this . . . one feels responsible . . ."

There was more in the tone than in the broken sentence; and Wyndham, coming up behind him, grasped his shoulders.

"My dear Theo," he said soothingly, "I can't let you

be hag-ridden by your favourite nightmare ! Honor is woman enough to be responsible for her own actions. Besides, she is perfectly well. I had a talk with her before she went. As to her coming down into this, you couldn't have held her back. She has every right to stand by you, if she chooses ; and you must know, even better than I do, that in the good future ahead of you, wherever you may be, unless it's active service, Honor will be there too, . . . as sure as my name's Wyndham."

This was quite a long speech for Paul ; one that it cost him an effort to make ; and Desmond, fully realising the fact, turned upon his friend with impulsive warmth.

"True for you, Paul, old man ! She's a Meredith. That about covers everything. What an amazing talent you have for casting out devils !—Now, let's be commonsensible, and have some food. *Kohi hai ! Tiffin lao.*"¹

And as if the walls had ears, the meal made its appearance with that silent celerity which the retired Anglo-Indian—who has sworn at native servants for thirty years—misses so keenly, when he is relegated to the cumbersome ministrations of the British house-parlour-maid of Ealing.

"By the way," Desmond remarked, as he dissected a fowl, cooked—by the mercy of the gods—in that elusive interval between toughness and putrescence, the pursuit of which gives to hot-weather housekeeping an excitement peculiarly its own, "there's bad news from the Infantry camp this morning. Poor old Buckley. A cramp seizure at midnight. Went out in three hours ; and was buried at dawn. Mackay showed me a note from Dr Lowndes saying he believed it was one of those odd freaks of disease, a spurious case. Sheer funk ; and nothing else. Camp was in a flourishing condition. No deaths for nearly a week. Then, yesterday, the Colonel's bearer must needs appropriate an unattached germ ; and it seems that this got on the poor chap's nerves. He dined chiefly off whisky ; and afterwards yarned away to Lowndes about his wife and children. Hadn't seen 'em for eight years. Never mentioned 'em to Lowndes in his life before : and from what one has heard, the

¹ Any one there ! Bring tiffin.

wire that goes home this morning will barely spoil her appetite for dinner ; which only seems to add a finishing touch to the pity of it all. Mysterious thing . . . marriage . . . ”

He broke off short on the word. The thought of his own first venture, and the misery that might have come of it, but for an accident so strange as to seem unreal, sealed his lips on the subject of the eternal riddle of the universe : and Paul, being blest with understanding, unobtrusively shifted the talk to another channel.

There could be no thought of polo for Desmond that afternoon ; though Major Olliver came and reasoned with him forcibly in the verandah. He devoted himself, instead, to the exhaustive disinfection of the sick-room and dressing-room. It was hot work ; unpleasant work. But it was good to be through with it ; to have rid the house of the last vestige of an uninvited and unwelcome guest. With which reflection Desmond sat down finally in the sanctuary of his study ; lit a cheroot ; and opened a battered original of Omar Khayyam, whose stately quatrains and exquisite imagery were less hackneyed then, than they have since become among modern devotees of culture.

A great silence pervaded the house. He had left Lenox in the blessed borderland between sleeping and waking, with Zyarulla on guard ; and looking in on Paul, had found him dozing also, after the morning's unwonted exertion. No doubt Frank would drive Honor back for tea : and even while he read Desmond's ear was strained to catch the sound of wheels. This capacity for sustained ardour is a very rare quality in love that has attained its object, and the woman who does not succeed—unwittingly enough—in extinguishing it within the first few years of marriage is rarer still.

The sound he waited for came at length ; and he sprang out of his chair. But in hurrying through the drawing-room, towards the hall, another sound arrested him : the unmistakable clink of the tonga bar.

“A tonga ? Why, who the deuce . . . ?” he ejaculated mentally. “It can't be”

But at this point he fairly ran into the arms of a woman, in alpaca dust-cloak and shikarri helmet; a woman who clutched his left arm with both hands: and before he could collect his scattered senses, Quita's voice was in his ears.

"Oh, Captain Desmond . . . tell me . . . is he . . . ?"

"He is out of all danger now, . . . if he can be kept quiet," Desmond answered, stifling his own amazement in view of her white face and shaking lips.

"Thank God. Oh, thank God!" The words were a mere flutter of breath; and with the sudden relief from long tension all her courage went to pieces. A dry sob broke in her throat. Her lids dropped; and she fell limply against him.

"You poor, dear, plucky woman," he murmured, putting an arm round her, and gently removing the heavy helmet; while she lay motionless; her head on his shoulder; no vestige of colour in lips or cheeks.

Desmond began to think she must have fainted outright: and while he held her thus, meditating a cautious removal of his burden to the sofa, steps in the hall were followed by the appearance of Honor in the doorway: a radiant Honor, aglow with the good news that had brought her straight back to him, like a homing bird. Her small gasp of surprise melted into a smile of amused understanding, as Theo telegraphed wireless messages to her over the golden brown head that was trespassing, flagrantly and confidently, on her own exclusive property. The whole thing was so exactly like Quita: so daring; so preposterous; so entirely forgivable! And Honor's hospitable brain at once began scouring the bungalow for some corner where she might stow this unexpected addition to her elastic household.

"She must have left Dalhousie directly she got my first wire," Desmond said under his breath. "Get some brandy, while I put her down."

But his first movement roused Quita from semi-unconsciousness. She lifted her head with a startled sound; and at sight of Honor the blood rushed back into her face.

"This is pretty behaviour!" she said with a little

broken laugh. "I'm so sorry. It must have been the reaction, the relief, after that excruciating journey."

"No need to apologise!" Desmond answered, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "No use either to try and push my arm away. Let me get you to the sofa first."

Honor piled two cushions behind her; and as she sank back into their silken softness, leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"You very wonderful person," she said. "How on earth did you pull through it, all alone?"

Quita shrugged her shoulders.

"It was not amusing," she answered with her whimsical smile. "But it was an experience: and that is always something,—when it is over! I think I never realised before how big and how terrible a country India is: or how kind people are out here," she added, looking from one to the other with misty eyes.

"Kind? Nonsense!" It was Honor who spoke. "Now . . . will you have a peg, or some tea?"

"Tea, please. And after that, I may see . . . Eldred, mayn't I?"

Instinctively she appealed to Desmond, who knitted his brows in distress. "I'm afraid that's out of the question, . . . yet awhile," he said.

"Well then . . . when?"

"Can't say for certain. Probably not for two or three days. I wouldn't so much as risk telling him that you are here till then."

The mist on her lashes overflowed; and she dashed an impatient hand across them with small result.

"But I have waited three days already. And since this morning I have been counting the hours . . . the minutes . . ."

It was no use. She could not go on without further loss of dignity; and Honor hastened into the breach.

"Drink your tea first, dear. You can talk afterwards."

And as she obeyed, Desmond came round and sat beside her.

"See here, Miss Maurice," he began. But she raised an imploring hand.

"Oh, don't call me that . . now. It hurts. It makes me feel I have no manner of right to be here. And I have a little right, haven't I?"

"More than a little, I should say, . . Mrs Lenox. Is that better?"

She flushed to the eyes, and glanced down at her bare left hand. It was the first time she had heard her married name; and the sound of it was music in her ears. But she shook her head.

"No. It's almost worse, till I know for certain what's going to come of my mad leap in the dark."

"Well then . . .?"

"Why not . . 'Quita'?" She looked up beseechingly. "I should love that: and it would make me feel less of an intruder."

"You are forbidden, on pain of instantaneous eviction, to feel anything of the sort! And I heartily vote for 'Quita,'" Desmond answered, smiling into her troubled face with so irresistible a friendliness that she must needs smile back at him, however mistily.

"Oh, but it's good to talk nonsense with you again!" she cried. "Only, I want to know, . . please, about Eldred. He is too weak. Is that it?"

"Far too weak. You see, we only pulled him round the corner at three o'clock this morning; and the great thing now is to avoid any risk of reactionary fever. Well, you know yourself . . I may speak frankly?" She inclined her head. "Your coming, besides being emotionally disturbing, will make something of a complication under the circumstances . ."

"Oh, I know . . I know! It seems like forcing his hand. Every minute I see more plainly that I ought never to come at all."

"Waiting would have been wiser," Desmond reproved her gently. "But I admire the pluck of the whole thing far too much to scold you for it."

Her smile had a touch of wistfulness.

"That's so like you! But I don't know about pluck. Perhaps, if I had realised all the details, I might have hesitated; though I doubt it. I half lost my senses for the time being; and I believe poor Michel thought I'd

lost them permanently! He was furious with me for going."

"Rather rough on him, when you come to think of it! But why on earth didn't you wire to us before starting?"

"At first it simply didn't occur to me; and when it did, I had just sense enough to know that you would probably wire back 'Don't come.' And even *I* could hardly have persisted in the face of that! So I determined to take the small risk with the big one. Dak bungalows seem to grow wild in India; and I thought there would surely be one here where I could get some sort of a bed."

"Dak bungalow, indeed! If there is one, *I* won't help you to find it!" This from Honor, in a burst of righteous wrath. "So you may as well resign yourself to staying with us, whether you like it or not!"

"With you? Is it possible? I thought . . . But have you really a corner available? I could sleep divinely on the hearth-rug, I'm so desperately tired, and *so* relieved."

"Very well. That settles it. But I'll let you off the hearth-rug, even though you did fling Dak bungalows at my head! Captain Lenox is in Baby's nursery; and we can shut off the dressing-room for you, if you can manage with a chair-bed. It's quite safe. Everything has been disinfected. I believe Theo knew you were coming! Will that do?"

"Do? *Ma foi*, . . . but how does one say thank you for such goodness?"

"One refrains!" Desmond remarked, handing her empty cup across to his wife.

Quita laughed.

"You are incorrigible!" said she. "But there is still this to think of. With your friends coming and going, how am I to be . . . accounted for till I have seen . . . Eldred? If I am Miss Maurice, *par exemple*, what am I doing in Dera Ishmael? And if not . . .? *Mon Dieu*, but it's an ignominious tangle. I'm as bad as Alice in Wonderland in the wood. I seem suddenly to have lost my identity: and in my mad anxiety and impatience to get here I never thought anything about it till I was sweltering in that horrible barge this morning. Shall I

live altogether in my room? It would be no more than I deserve."

"My dear, you'll do nothing of the sort." It was Honor this time. "Luckily for you, the Battery's in camp; and since Captain Lenox's illness there's been an end of my tea-parties. Our own people may be looking in now he's better. But for the next two days or so I shall simply be '*dawazar bund*'.¹ It needs no effort to develop a headache, or a touch of fever this weather. There's only Paul, and Frank, whom I couldn't shut out. May we just explain to them, more or less, how things stand?"

"But yes. Of course you must. And . . . after all . . ." She hesitated, flushing painfully.

"After all," Desmond came to her rescue, "it won't be so very long before the vexed question of your identity is settled for good. Now I'd better go and speak to Paul. He may be turning up for tea, any minute; and that would be awkward for you."

As he reached the door at the far end of the room, Honor fled after him.

"Read those, dear," she said breathlessly, thrusting a letter and telegram into his hand. "They will account for this morning. I had bad news. But thank God it's all right now. I wired."

"And never told *me*?"

"You were so happy. How could I?"

"Then that was why you bolted?"

"Yes. I couldn't have kept it up for long."

"Well . . . I've no time to scold you now," he said, looking unspeakable things at her. "Wait till I get you to myself, . . . that's all!"

This short colloquy, carried on in an undertone, did not reach Quita's ears.

"What sort of a man is this Paul?" she asked as Honor returned to her chair. "I don't know his other name! Is he the sort that would be likely to understand . . . our very incomprehensible position?"

Honor took a leather frame from the table beside her, and put it into Quita's hands.

¹ Not at home.

"If you are any judge of faces, that's the best answer I can give you."

Quita scanned the picture abstractedly for several seconds.

"Yes. He'll do," was her verdict. Then she flung the thing from her; and burying her face in the cushions sobbed with the heart-broken abandonment of a child.

"Oh, what a blind fool I was to come!" she lamented through her tears. "I don't believe he'll understand my madness. And if he doesn't . . . he'll never forgive me!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"Here the lost hours the lost hours renew."—ROSETTI.

"It progresses, doesn't it?"

"It does more than that. It lives. You've transfigured it in these few days; and I like your knack of emphasising essentials without jarring the harmony of the whole. You ought to make your mark as a portrait painter in time."

"I've done so already . . . more or less," Quita answered modestly, stepping backward, with tilted head, to get a better view of her achievement. It was the study of Lenox, which, for all her perturbation, she had packed as tenderly as if it were a live thing; and which alone had made life endurable for the past three days. Her easel had been set up in the dining-room, where she could work without fear of chance intruders, who gravitated either to the drawing-room or the study: and on this fourth morning after her arrival, she was standing at it with Desmond, who had looked in for a word with her before starting for the Lines. "If you were to go home now," she added, after a pause, "you would find the name Quita Maurice not quite unknown in artistic circles. But they'll never see this, though it's going to be the best thing I've done yet; because . . ."

"Yes, naturally, . . . because . . ."

"How nice you are!" she said simply. "One needn't dot the i's, and cross all the t's with you. Of course it's very incomplete still. A suggestive study is the most one can achieve from memory. So you mustn't judge it as a portrait,—yet. It's just a daring experiment that no right-minded artist would have attempted. But it's come out better than I thought possible. And I'm glad you like my work."

"I do; no question. I'm no 'critic, though; only a soldier, with a taste for most kinds of art. It's full of latent vigour; rugged without being rough, like Lenox himself. A fine bit of weathered rock, eh? I am only afraid that after feasting your eyes on this, the original may give you something of a shock at first sight."

"Is he so terribly changed . . . in one month?"

"Well, think what he's been through. Concussion and cholera have knocked some of the vigour out of him; and he looks years older, for the time being. But you mustn't let that upset you. It's not unusual after cholera; and in a week he'll be looking more like himself again."

Then the truth dawned on her.

"Captain Desmond,—are you telling me all this because . . . ?"

"Yes . . . again, because . . . !" he answered, smiling.

"To-day?"

"As soon as you please."

She gave a little gasp; then shut her lips tightly.

"Do you mean . . . have you actually told him?" she murmured with averted eyes.

"Yes."

"And did he—is he——?"

"It's not for me to say." Desmond seemed equal to any amount of incoherence this morning. "You'll find out for yourself in no time."

"Oh dear!"

"Is it as dreadful as all that?"

"In some ways,—yes. It takes my breath away."

"Try and get it back before you go in to him," he counselled her kindly. "And keep some sort of hold on yourself—for his sake. Don't trouble him about results, unless

he broaches the subject. If we can keep clear of the worry element, just getting hold of you again may do him a power of good."

Then,—creature of moods and impulse that she was,—she turned on him spontaneously, both hands outflung.

"*Mon Dieu*, what a friend you have been to us both! Thank you a thousand times, for everything. I know you hate it. But if I kept it in any longer, I should burst!"

"Just as well you let it out, then," Desmond answered, laughing, and grasping the proffered hands. "I must be off now. Good luck to you, Quita. You're worthy of him."

For some minutes after he had gone Quita stood very still, trying to get her breath back, as he had suggested: a less simple affair than it seemed, on the face of it. For although she had taken the plunge, in an impulse of despair, a week ago, she had only grasped the outcome in all its bearings during the past three days, throughout which she had been acutely aware of Eldred's presence on the farther side of her barred and bolted door. He had told her plainly that, until he felt quite sure of himself, he dared not take her back. Yet now, by her own unconsidered act, she was forcing upon him, at the least, a public recognition of their marriage; an acknowledgment that might make further separation difficult, if not impossible, for the present. All her pride and independence of spirit revolted against this unvarnished statement of fact; and the memory of Michael's random remark heightened her nervous apprehension. Yet, on the other hand, Love—who is a born peace-maker—argued that, after all, he might not be sorry to have his hand forced by so clear a proof of all that she was ready to do and suffer on his behalf. An argument strongly reinforced by her original determination to overrule his scruples, and help him in the struggle that loomed ahead.

In this fashion Love and Pride tossed decision to and fro, as they have done in a hundred heart-histories; till common-sense stepped in with the reminder that Eldred was waiting; and that by now retreat was out of the question. The thought roused her to a more normal state

of confidence and courage. Putting away palette and brushes, she covered up her canvas: and because, for all her artistry, she was very much a woman, went straight-way—not to her husband's door—but to her own mirror! The vision that looked out at her was by no means discouraging: a demure vision, in a simple, unconventional gown of green linen, with a Puritan collar, and a wide white ribbon at the waist. A few superfluous touches to her hair, and equally superfluous tweaks to the bow of her ribbon belt, wrought some infinitesimal improvement in the picture, which no mere man, hungering for the sight and sound of her, would be the least likely to detect. Then half a dozen swift steps brought her to his door: the one that communicated with the dining-room.

It opened on to a curtain, about which there still clung a faint suggestion of carbolic.

“Eldred?” she said softly. And the voice she had last heard through the hiss of rain, and the crash of broken branches, answered: “Come in.”

She pushed aside the curtain, and stood so, paralysed by a nervousness altogether new to her.

He lay on a Madeira lounge-chair, with pillows at his back. Every bone in his face, every line scored by the graving-tools of conflict and pain, showed cruelly distinct in the morning light. At sight of her, he tried to speak; but the muscles of his throat rebelled: and he simply held out his arms. Then, in one rush, she came to him: and as he laid hands on her, drawing her down on to a spare corner of his chair, she leaned forward and buried her face in the soft flannel of his coat.

Nothing but silence becomes the great moments of life: and for a long while he held her thus, without power or desire of speech. All his man's strength melted in him at the faint fragrance of her hair; at the exquisite yielding of her figure, as she lay palpitating against him; at the yet more exquisite assurance that the love he had gained was a thing beyond estimation, a thing indestructible as the soul itself. For her very surrender was quick with the vitality that was her crowning charm.

And she, feeling the tremor that ran through him as he kissed the blue-veined hollow of her temple,—the only

space available—exulted in the belief that love had triumphed over bloodless scruples once and for all.

"Quita," he whispered at length, "what possessed you to face that nightmare of a journey alone?"

"*You* possessed me." She made no attempt to lift her head.

"But, my darling, you ought not to have come. You ought not to be here. You know that."

"Yes. I know it. Are you . . . angry, that I am here?"

"Angry? My God! It's new life to me. Your voice, just the music of it, gets into my head like wine. Look up, lass. I love your hair, every wisp and thread of it. But I am waiting for something more."

The appeal was irresistible; and she looked up, accordingly, setting her hands lightly on his shoulders. The change wrought in him by illness and mental struggle pierced her like a physical pang; and her eyes fell before the yearning in his, the revelation of chained-up forces, and emotions straining at the leash. Then, still keeping her lids closed, she tilted her head backward, her lips just parted; and again, as on that night of enchantment at Kajiar, they were swept beyond the boundaries of space and time; beyond the stumbling-blocks, the pitiful limitations of earth.

But limitations are as indispensable to life on our bewildering planet as bread and meat. The wine of ecstasy can only be taken in small doses, at a price.

Quita sat upright at last, on the spare corner of her husband's chair, flushed, smiling, and not a little tremulous. Stumbling-blocks and limitations loomed again on the horizon. But for the present she would have none of them. Eldred was not angry. He wanted her—supremely:—how supremely, his lips had just been telling her in language more primitive, more forcible than speech.

And now he lay merely watching her, still retaining her hands, drinking in the penetrating charm of her, as a parched traveller drinks at a roadside spring.

"Well?" he asked presently. "After all that—what next? There's the rub."

"Need we spoil these first heavenly moments together by looking for rocks ahead, *mon cher*? Captain Desmond begged me to keep the 'worry element' at arm's-length."

"Dear old Desmond! He's made of gold. But now that you are here, you've got to be explained. And there's only one way to explain you—Mrs Lenox!"

Her face quivered.

"Eldred, I won't be explained . . . that way, unless . . . you really wish it. Only Mrs Olliver and Major Wyndham know about me: and now I've seen you, and feel sure there's no more danger, I can easily go back to Dalhousie and stay there, till you . . . till you're more ready for me."

"Can you though?" He pressed her hands. "And do you believe I am capable of packing you off to-morrow?"

"I don't know. I think you'd prefer not to. But I believe you are capable of doing anything, once you're convinced it's right."

"Dearest, indeed I'm not." He spoke with sudden vehemence. "If I were, we might be clear of this unholy tangle by now. But since you've honoured me by plunging into hell fire on my account, I can't let you go again . . . yet."

The last word fell like a drop of cold water on the hope that glowed at her heart. But she chose to ignore it.

"Well then?"

He raised one hand, and laid it lightly on her breast, feeling for hidden treasure. Then his fingers closed on the two rings; and he smiled.

"Since you seem to have forgiven the ill-tempered chap who gave you those, you might do worse than have 'em out, and wear them—by way of explanation!"

Her own hand went up to them, instinctively, and closed over his.

"I'll take them out now, at once, if you'll promise to put the wedding one on, yourself, with the proper words."

"What? Not the whole blessed service?"

At the note of dismay in his voice her laughter rang out, clear and natural; a silver sound, that pierced him with its poignant sweetness.

"Darling idiot! Of course not. I only meant the 'ring' words for luck. Though if I could have my own way, I'd like the whole thing over again, to make it feel more real. All that seems to have happened to a not very admirable girl I once knew, in another life."

"Does it indeed?" he asked, smiling upon her in great contentment. "I rather admired that girl myself! But believe me, Quita, it's all real enough to satisfy us both. 'There's no discharge in that war.' And you don't get a human man to go through the ordeal of that service except under severe stress of circumstance! If I couldn't recapture you any other way, I'd do it . . with alacrity. Not unless."

"But who will do the explaining to the station at large?"

"Desmond and his wife will gladly do that much for us." He was about to add that his chief friend knew already: but decided that it would be hardly fair on Dick to 'give him away.'

"And where did it all happen?" she demanded, dimpling with enjoyment. "In Dalhousie?"

"I imagine so."

"You mustn't imagine. We must have all the details clear, so as to lie consistently!"

"Well then, to account for our abruptness, we'll decide that I lost my heart to you at home, some time ago; and rediscovered you by chance in Dalhousie."

She laughed again, from pure exuberance of happiness.

"That's capital! I'll explain it all to Mrs Desmond; and she shall do the rest."

While they talked, she had succeeded in extricating her rings; and now she dropped them into his open palm:—the gold band of Destiny, and the hoop of sapphires and diamonds that he had chosen with such elaborate care, and presented to her with such awkward, palpitating shyness nearly six years ago.

"Put them on, please," she said softly, thrusting out her wedding finger. "'For better for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health; till death us do part.'"

On the last words she lifted her head. He caught the

gleam of tears on her lashes, and slipped the ring on to her finger; uttering the triple asseveration with a suppressed fervour rarely to be heard at the altar rails. Then the second hoop was added: and, still keeping possession of the fettered hand, he sat silent a moment, looking down at his achievement with an absurd sense of satisfaction. Quita was looking at it also, wondering if he could hear the hammering of her heart.

"Now we are really married," she murmured as simply as a child.

"Weren't we before?" he asked, on a note of amusement.

"I suppose so. It didn't feel like it."

"And does it feel more like it now?"

"Not much, yet. But it will, in time."

"Yes. In time."

The pause, and the emphasis smote her. But again she ignored the cloud no bigger than a man's hand; defying its power to veil her sunlight.

"The proper thing after a wedding is . . . to kiss your wife," she remarked demurely, without looking up.

"Is it? I don't remember doing so last time."

"You never did; and it's bad luck not to. That's why everything went wrong! You were too shy; and . . . your first wife didn't much like that sort of thing."

"My second wife will have to put up with it, whether she likes it or not!" he answered, drawing her towards him by dear and delicious degrees. "We won't play fast and loose with our luck this time."

An abrupt knock at the door startled her out of his arms; and the curtain was pushed aside by Desmond: —a strangely transfigured Desmond, with set jaw, and desperate eyes.

"My dear man . . ." Lenox began. But an intuition of catastrophe past the show of speech made him break off short.

Then Desmond spoke, in a voice thick and unlike his own.

"Sorry to spoil things by interrupting you in this way. But one had to tell you. It's Honor . . ."

He could get no further: but his eyes were terribly

eloquent; and the silence held them all as in a vice. The awakening woman in Quita gave her courage to break it.

"May I go to her?" she pleaded. "And help her . . if one can?"

Though the plea was addressed to Desmond, she glanced first at Lenox, and read approval in his eyes.

But Desmond shook his head.

"That's my business," he answered quietly. He had mastered his voice by now. "I want you to take over charge here. It's a sharp attack. I shan't leave her again, till . . . it's over."

And before either of them knew how to answer him, the curtain had fallen heavily behind him.

Overwhelming tragedy, striking across their golden hour like a naked sword, wrenched them out of themselves.

Without a word Quita knelt down beside her husband, bowing her forehead on the back of his hand. Women of her temperament are little given to the habit of prayer: and her rare communings with the Hidden Soul of Things more often took the form of wordless aspiration, than of direct petition or praise. But now her uplifted soul went out in a passionate appeal to the Great Giver, and the great Taker Away, for the life of the woman whom she had hated so heartily less than three months ago.

And Lenox lay looking straight before him, stroking her hair soothingly from time to time.

"Desmond is a strong man, a very strong man," he said, as if speaking to himself. "But there's a flaw in his armour just above the heart; and I believe that if any real harm comes to that wife of his, he'll go to pieces, like a wheel with the centre knocked out."

CHAPTER XXII.

“What Love may do, that dares Love attempt.”

—SHAKSPERE.

IT was evening at last: a sullen, breathless evening, heavy with threatening cloud.

Since morning Honor Desmond had been fighting for life, against appalling odds; while the man, whose love for her almost amounted to a religion, did all that human skill could devise, which was pitifully little after all, to ease the torturing thirst and pain, to uphold the vitality that ebbed visibly with the ebbing day. But the very vigour of her constitution went against her; for cholera takes strong hold upon the strong. And Desmond never left her for an instant. He seemed to have passed beyond the zone of hunger, thirst, or weariness, to have reached that exalted pitch of suffering where the soul transcends the body's imperious demands, asserts itself, momentarily, for the absolute unconquerable thing it is.

Frank Olliver, in defiance of a July sun, flitted restlessly in and out of the bungalow; and since Desmond would admit no one but the doctor to his wife's room, she found some measure of comfort in futile attempts to lighten Paul Wyndham's anxiety, and distract his thoughts; while the newly joined husband and wife, so strangely isolated in their moment of reunion, waited and hoped through the interminable hours, and snatched fugitive gleams of contentment from the fact that now, at least, they could suffer together.

James Mackay, the regimental doctor, a crustacean type of Scot, came and went as frequently as his manifold duties would permit. On each occasion he was waylaid in the dining-room by Paul Wyndham, his face haggard with suffering; and on each occasion the little man's decisive headshake struck a fresh blow at the hope that took ‘such an unconscionable time a-dying.’ Finally he spoke his conviction outright. It was late afternoon, and Honor's strength and courage, though still flickering fitfully, were almost spent.

"I'm doubting if we can do much more for her now," he said, when the door of her room had been quietly closed behind him. "It'll be no less than a miracle if she lasts through the night."

"Have you told him that?" Wyndham asked in a voice of stunned quietness.

"Man alive, no! 'Twould be no mortal use. *He* won't give up hope till the last nail's in her coffin." Paul winced visibly, and by way of atonement for his bluntness, the other made haste to add: "If there's the remotest chance of pulling her through, Desmond 'll do it. You may swear to that. The man's just one concentrated, incarnate purpose."

Wyndham set his lips, and turned away: and the Scotchman stood eyeing him keenly.

"What sort of a tiffin did you have?" he asked with rough kindness.

"Oh, I don't know. Nothing much."

"I thought so. Eat a good dinner, man. Starvation's no use to any one, and I don't want to have *you* back on my hands."

With that he departed, and Wyndham had just decided on filling another pipe, since some pretence at occupation was imperative, when Meredith entered unannounced.

A glance at his face showed Paul that he knew, and believed the worst; and for a moment they confronted one another in mute dismay. The Englishman's inability to put his heart into words has its pathetic aspect at times. These two men were linked by years of mutual work, and immediate mutual pain: yet Wyndham merely laid down his pipe and asked: "Have you seen Mackay?"

"Yes. Met him on my way here. I'm going in to her at once."

And Paul, picking up the discarded pipe, looked after him with envy and hunger in his eyes.

Meredith knocked at the bedroom door.

"Who's there?" Desmond's voice came sharp as a challenge.

"John."

"Come in, then."

And he went in.

The room was large, lofty, and very simply furnished. With the leisurely swaying of the punkah, light and shadow flitted across the wide, low bed, on one side of which Honor lay, warmly covered with blankets, her breath coming in laboured gasps. Desmond knelt by her; and, on Meredith's entrance, set down the feeding-cup, but because her hand was on his coat-sleeve, he did not change his position, or rise from his knees. She held out the other to Meredith. But it fell limply before he could reach her.

"John . . . dear," she greeted him in a husky whisper. "I'm so glad. Sit near me . . . here."

He obeyed, seating himself on the unoccupied part of the bed; and taking up her hand, cherished it between both his own. It was cold and clammy, the finger-tips wrinkled like a washerwoman's, and at sight of her face his self-control deserted him, so that he dared not risk speech. For cholera does its work swiftly and efficaciously, and in eight hours Honor Desmond's beauty had been ruthlessly wiped out. In the grey, pinched features and sunken eyes—already dimmed by a creeping film that blurred the two faces she so loved—it was hard to trace any likeness to the radiant woman of twenty-four hours ago. Only the burnished bronze of her hair, encircling her head in a large loose plait, remained untouched by the finger of death.

When Meredith could command his voice, he spoke quietly and cheerfully of the day's work, and of the certainty that she would pull through. Then the hand in his stirred uneasily.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

"John, I want you to remember,"—the voice was still husky, and she spoke with difficulty—"whatever happens, . . . and tell father, please . . . it wasn't Theo's fault. It was mine."

The hand on her husband's coat-sleeve felt its way up uncertainly, till it rested in a lingering caress on the dark bowed head. For Desmond, leaning on his elbow, had covered his eyes with one hand.

Meredith frowned.

"Dearest girl, it was no one's fault. Besides, you are going to get well. But talking is a strain on you now. I'll look in later."

He stooped and kissed her forehead.

"Good-bye," she whispered.

"No, not good-bye," he contradicted her steadily. "I shall see you again after mess."

She sighed, and her lids fell. The terrible apathy of cholera was crushing the soldier spirit out of her by inches.

"God! I don't believe she heard me," he murmured in sudden despair.

At that Desmond uncovered his eyes. "She heard you, right enough," he said quietly. "Trust me not to let her go."

And Meredith went reluctantly out, leaving man and wife alone with the Shadowy Third; the only third that could ever come between them.

Honor's hand slipped down from his head to his shoulder, and she opened her eyes; the soul in them struggling to pierce the mists that deepened every minute.

"Darling," she breathed. "Come closer . . . much closer. I wish . . . I wish you didn't seem all blurred."

He bent nearer, looking steadfastly into her altered face.

"That better, dear?" he asked, controlling his voice with an effort.

"Yes. A little. Whatever John may say, it *was* my fault," she persisted, for in spite of pain and prostration, the mists had not clouded her brain. "It was selfish of me to insist. See . . . what I've made you suffer. But you don't . . . blame me, do you, . . . in your heart?"

"Blame you, . . . my best beloved? How can you ask it? I . . . I worship you," he added very low.

The extravagant word, reviving dear and imperishable memories, called up a quivering smile, more heart-piercing than a cry: and Desmond, putting a great restraint upon himself, enfolded her with one arm, and kissed her softly, lingeringly, as one might kiss a child.

"My very Theo," she murmured, her voice breaking

with love. "It has been so perfect . . I suppose that's why . . Not three years yet; and . . I can't bear . . to leave you behind, even for a little."

"You'll not do that, Honor," his voice had the level note of decision. "If *you* go, . . . I go too."

"No, no. You must wait . . for your boy."

Desmond set his teeth, and answered nothing. In the stress of anguish he had forgotten his child.

Suddenly a convulsive shuddering ran through her, and her breath came short and quick.

"Theo, . . what's happening ?" she panted. "Where are you ? Hold me. Everything's . . slipping away."

It cut him to the heart to unclasp the fingers that clung to him; though he was back again in a moment, holding weak brandy and water to her lips.

"Drink it, Honor. For God's sake, drink it !" he commanded, a ring of fear in his voice. For in that moment, a change, terrible and significant, had come over her. His appeal produced no response, no movement of lips or eyelids. Her face seemed to shrink and sharpen, and change colour before his eyes. Her breath was cold as the air from a cave.

He set down the wine-glass, and in the first shock and horror of it all stood like a man turned to stone. Then common-sense pricked him back to life, and to the necessity for immediate action. After so sharp an attack, collapse would probably be severe and prolonged. He laid his fingers on her pulse. It was rapid, and barely perceptible, but the still small flutter of life was there.

He opened the verandah door, where Amar Singh and a very aggrieved Aberdeen terrier had sat since morning, and issued a swift order for hot water, mustard, warm turpentine; a grim repetition of the battle he had fought out a week ago. But now he fought single-handed, while Amar Singh and a small tremulous ayah, crouching beside a charcoal brazier in the verandah, kept up a steady supply of his primitive needs.

Thus James Mackay found him on his return; still doggedly applying friction and restoratives without having made an inch of progress for his pains. Darkness had fallen by now, and the one lamp, set well away from

the bed, made a pallid oasis in its own vicinity. Desmond had flung aside his coat, and his thin shirt clung in patches to his damp body. His face was set in rigid lines; and the little doctor, who carried a heart of flesh under a porcupine exterior, was haunted for days by the despair in his eyes.

“How long have you been at it, man?” he asked without preamble.

“A lifetime, I should say. Possibly an hour.”

“No change at all?”

“Not the slightest. But I know . . . she’s alive.”

Mackay scrutinised the awful stillness on the bed.

“We must try hypodermic injection,” he said gently. “And in the meantime . . .” he went over to a table strewn with sick-room paraphernalia, and poured out half a pint of champagne, “you’ll please drink that.”

And as Desmond obeyed automatically, his hand shook so that the edge of the tumbler rattled against his teeth. The body was beginning to assert itself at last. But the stinging liquid revived him; and in a silence, broken only by an abrupt direction or request from the Scotchman, the last available resources were tried again and yet again, without result. Finally Mackay looked up, and Desmond read the verdict in his eyes.

“My dear man, it’s no use,” he said simply. “She’s beyond our reach now.”

Desmond’s lips whitened: but he braced his shoulders. “She’s not. I don’t believe it,” he answered, on a toneless note of decision. And the other knew that only the slow torture of the night-watches could brand the truth into his brain.

With a gesture of weariness, infinitely pathetic, he turned back to the bed, and bending down, mechanically rearranged the sheet, and smoothed a crease or two out of the pillow. The bowed back and shoulders, despite their suppleness and strength, had in them a pathos too deep for tears: and Mackay, feeling himself dismissed, went noiselessly out.

For a long moment Desmond’s unnatural stoicism held firm. Then, deep down in him, something seemed to snap. With a dry, choking sob, he flung himself on his

knees beside the bed, and the waters came in even unto his soul.

It seemed a thing incredible that one hour could hold such a store of anguish. The half of his personality, the hidden life of heart and spirit, seemed dead already: and in that first shuddering sense of loneliness, time was not.

A familiar choking sensation recalled him to outward things. The punkah coolie had fallen asleep; and in a fever of irritation he sprang to his feet. Then the thought pierced him: "What on earth does it matter . . now?"

But the trivial prick of discomfort had, in some inexplicable fashion, readjusted the balance of things; reawakened the conviction that had so strangely upheld him throughout the day; and with it the spirit of 'no surrender,' which was the very essence of the man. All the tales he had heard of cholera patients literally dragged from the brink of the grave by devoted nursing crowded in upon him, like reinforcements backing up a forlorn hope, and once again he bent over his wife, caressing the crisp upward sweep of her hair.

"Honor, you *shall* live. By God, you *shall*!" he whispered low in her ear, as though her spirit could hear, and take comfort from the assurance.

A downward jerk of the punkah rope set the great frill flapping with ostentatious vigour: and he himself set to work again no less vigorously; fighting death hand to hand with every weapon at command. He clung to his renewed hope with a desperation that was terrible; realising more acutely than before that to let go of her was to fall into nameless spaces void of companionship and love. Once or twice the flicker of the punkah frill created an illusion of movement in the face, and his heart leapt into his throat, only to sink to the depths again when he discoverd his mistake. But nothing now could turn him from his purpose; or quench that indomitable determination to succeed which is one of the strongest levers of the world.

And at long-last, when persistence had begun to seem mere folly, came the first faint shadow of change. Slowly, very slowly, her face appeared to be losing the bluish

tinge of cholera. Fearful lest imagination should be cheating him, he fetched the lamp, and held it over her. Unquestionably the colour had improved.

The loose chimney rattled as he set down the lamp; and he spilled half the brandy he tried to pour into a spoon. Then, steadying himself by a supreme effort, he managed to pour a little of it between her lips, watching with suspended breath for the least sign of moisture at the corners. A drop or two trickled uselessly out, but the muscles of her throat stirred slightly, and the rest was retained.

Then for a moment Desmond let himself go. With a low cry he leaned down, and slipping both arms under her, pressed his lips upon her cold ones, long and passionately, as though he would impart to her the very power of his spirit, the living warmth of his body and heart. And at length, he was aware of a faint unmistakable attempt to return his pressure. He could have shouted for sheer triumph. It was as if he had created her anew. But love, having achieved its perfect work, must be kept under subjection till the accepted moment.

A little more brandy, a little more chafing of hands and limbs, and the miracle was complete. By degrees, as imperceptible as the coming of dawn, life stole back in response to his touch. She stirred, drew a deep breath, and opened her eyes.

"Theo, . . . is it you? Have I . . . got you . . . still?"

It was her own voice, clear and low, no longer the husky whisper of cholera. The caress in it penetrated like pain; and tears, sharp as knives, forced their way between his lids.

"Yes, my darling; . . . and I've got *you* still," he answered, his tenderness hovering over her like a flutter of wings.

"But what happened? I thought . . ."

"Don't tire your dear head with thinking. By God's mercy, I dragged you back from the utmost edge of things; and you've come to stay. That's enough for me."

Ten minutes later she was sleeping, lightly and naturally, her head nestling in the crook of his elbow, one hand clinging to a morsel of his shirt; while he leaned

above her, half-sitting, half-lying on the extreme edge of the bed, not daring to shift his strained position by so much as a hair's-breadth; till overwhelming weariness had its way with him, and he slept also, his head fallen back against the wall.

When at last he awoke, a pale shaft of light was feeling its way across the room from the long glass door that gave upon the verandah. Outside in the garden the crows and squirrels were awake, and talkative. The well-wheel had begun its plaintive music, punctuated with the splash of falling water, and the new day, in a sheet of flame, rolled up unconcernedly from the other side of the world.

Honor had turned over in her sleep, leaving him free to rise, and stretch himself exhaustedly; and as he stood looking down upon the night's achievement, upon the rhythmical rise and fall of his wife's breast beneath its light covering, new fires were kindled in the man's deep heart; new intimations of the height and depth, and power of that 'grand impulsion,' which men call Love; and with these, a new humility that forced him down upon his knees in a wordless ecstasy of thanksgiving.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"They are one and one, with a shadowy third;
One near one is too far."

—BROWNING.

QUITA was troubled.

A full week had elapsed since that day so strangely compounded of rapture and dread; of matter-of-fact service, and shy, tender intimacies that had seemed to set a seal on the completeness of their reunion. Yet, in the days that followed, she had been increasingly aware of a nameless something, an indefinable constraint between them, which instinct told her would not have been there if conscience had surrendered all along the line.

It was not his mere avoidance, after the first, of caresses congenial to the opening phase of marriage that disconcerted her. Such emotional reticence squared with her idea of the man. She would not have had him otherwise. They were sure of one another; and in both natures passion was proud and fastidious. It could thrive without much lip-service. The undefined aloofness that troubled Quita was spiritual, rather than physical. She was conscious of walls within walls, separating her from his essential self; and behind these again of an unobtrusive reserve force, whose power of endurance she could not estimate; because her dealings with Michael's shallower nature had afforded her no experience of a moral stability free from the warp of the personal equation. It was as if some intangible part of him, over which she could establish no hold, stood persistently afar off,—tormented, but immovable.

She could not know that the form of opium administered during his illness had revived and strengthened temptation when he himself was physically unfit to cope with it; that by her impulsive return to him, at a critical moment, she was forcing him open-eyed toward a catastrophe more lasting, more terrible for them both, than the initial harm done by her rejection of him five years ago. Reserve and self-disgust made speech on the subject seem a thing impossible; while his mere man's chivalry shrank from allowing her to guess that by an act of seeming reparation, she had run grave risk of putting real reparation out of her power. Once only did the love that consumed him break through the restraint he put upon himself in sheer self-defence.

It was the first day he had been allowed up at a normal hour; and coming into the dining-room, he had found her alone at her easel, near one of the long glass doors. At the sound of his step she turned her canvas round swiftly, and came to him with a glad lift of her head. He took her hands in his big grasp, and kissed her forehead.

"Good morning, lass," he said. "You never told me you had brought that with you. Couldn't be divorced from it, eh? What's the great work now? May I see?"

"But yes, naturally. I've been keeping it as a surprise for you. I don't believe I should ever have got through this last fortnight without it. *Voilà !*"

She set it facing him, and standing so with her eyes on the picture, waited eagerly for his word of praise. But as the seconds passed, and it did not come, she turned, to find him looking at her, not at the picture; his teeth tormenting his lower lip; a suspicious film dimming the clear blue of his eyes. Emboldened by this last incredible phenomenon, she came and stood close to him, yet without touching him.

"Darling, you do like it, don't you? I can't complete it till you give me a few sittings; but then—it will be my masterpiece. I shall never show it, at home, though. It's too much a part of myself . . . my very inmost self."

And he could not withhold the demonstration that such a confession provoked.

"Oh, my dear," he said at last, without releasing her. "You made too little of me once; and now you're making too much. I'm not worth it all."

She put a hand on his lips.

"Be quiet! I won't hear you when you talk so. Look properly at my picture now. You haven't told me it's good."

"Of course it's good. Amazingly good. But . . ." he laughed, a short contented laugh—"it's beyond me how you could be misguided enough to waste your remarkable talent in perpetuating anything so ugly!"

Her smile hinted at superior knowledge; yet she paid his obvious sincerity the compliment of not contradicting his final statement.

"In the first place, because I love it. And in the second place, because, for all true artists, who see in form and colour just a soul's attempts at self-expression, there is more essential beauty in certain kinds . . . of ugliness, than in the most faultless symmetry of lines and curves. One is almost tempted to say that there is no such thing as actual ugliness; that it is all a matter of understanding, of seeing deep enough. For instance, I find that essential beauty I spoke of in Mrs Olliver's face."

"Ah . . . so do I; of a rare quality."

"Well then, dear stupid, allow me to find it in yours also!"

"One to you," he admitted, smiling. "But now . . . I am in your hands till tiffin. What are you going to do with me? Read? Sing? The drawing-room's empty; and I haven't heard you since Kajiar."

"Do you want the Swinburne again?"

"No; by no means."

"Why not? Don't you like the song?"

"I like it far too well; and I'm not strong enough yet to stand a brutal assault upon my feelings! Come along, and give me something wholesome and simple. A convalescent needs milk diet mentally as well as physically, you know!"

This was on one of his best days. But there were others,—following upon nights of sleeplessness, and pain, and heart-searching unspeakable, only to be alleviated by the one unfailing remedy,—when the strain of repression demanded by her constant presence so wrought upon his nerves that he would get up and leave her abruptly without excuse; or shut himself into his room on the empty pretext of revising manuscript. As a matter of fact, he spent most of the time girding at the deliberate waste of good hours; till the consciousness of slipping deeper into the mire and the dread of ultimate defeat became almost an obsession, aggravated by ill-health and want of rest.

Quita, who remembered well his inexhaustible capacity for keeping still, was distressed and puzzled by these moods of restlessness verging on irritability, whose true significance she could not guess at; though she was woman enough to know that a position merely unsatisfactory for her, must be an actual strain on him. And as his strength returned, she could only hope from day to day for some allusion to the possibility of moving into their own bungalow; since it was clear that they could not remain with the Desmonds for ever! Pride and delicacy alike withheld her from the lightest mention of the subject. It seemed to her that she had transgressed sufficiently in both respects already. Yet, as the days accumulated to a

week, and still he said no word, she grew definitely anxious to know what was going to happen next.

But, with all its drawbacks and difficulties, this week of intimate everyday companionship had been one of the best weeks in her life. It had served, above all things, to establish her conviction that the husband she had chosen, by a lightning instinct of the brain rather than the heart, was in all respects a man among men. He appealed to the artist in her by a natural dignity and distinction of person and character, by a suggestion of volcanic forces warring with the ascetic strain in him yet steadfastly controlled; and above all, by a superb simplicity and unconsciousness of self, that draws introspective temperaments as infallibly as the moon draws the sea.

And apart from her joy in him, she was keenly alive to her surroundings; to the practical work going on about her; to the stimulating contact with a new type, a new atmosphere. At first she saw little of outsiders, or indeed of any one besides her husband. John Meredith came over every day; Wyndham, though still living in the house, had gone back to duty; while Desmond—after one day of complete collapse, when Frank revenged herself on him by monopolising Honor—had taken up his work again with heightened zest, and devoted every spare hour to his wife. But the four met at meals, and in the evening, when Quita kept all three men alert and amused by her intelligent questionings, her frank interest in every detail of her new profession, as it pleased her to call it.

Before the week was out her pocket note-book contained a small portrait-gallery of studies in pencil and water-colour. She sketched Desmond's old Sikh Ressaldar, with his finely carved features, deep eyes, and vast lop-sided blue and gold turban; and Desmond himself in the white uniform and long boots, which so greatly pleased her, occupied several pages.

Mounted on Shaitan's successor, she rode down with him twice to early parade; and sat entranced through the whole proceeding; watching the long lines of men and horses sweeping across the open plain, wheeling, retiring, advancing, changing formation with exquisite

and instantaneous precision, in response to Meredith's brisk words of command ; while massed lance-heads and steel shoulder-chains flashed and winked in the level light.

It was her first experience of meeting soldiers in the mass, on their own ground, and the man who has faced death and dealt it out to others appeals irresistibly to the fundamental barbaric in women. To this fascination, Quita added the artist's reverence for the men who 'do things,' as opposed to the men who record or express them.

She enlarged on the subject at breakfast one morning, in her usual direct fashion ; but Desmond would have none of it.

"Remember, Quita," said he, "that an artist, in the inclusive sense, when he is worth anything, stands for the strongest thing in the world . . . an idea."

Her face brightened with interest.

"That's true. But unhappily great art doesn't necessarily imply great character, and great action does. That's why the world's heroes have nearly always been men of action ; and always will be."

"Ah, now you've given yourself away neatly!" Desmond cried, like a great schoolboy. "Where would your heroes be a hundred years after their death, but for the men who immortalise them on canvas, and in print ? Would the effect of their noble living be one-half as far-reaching, if it remained unrecorded ? It's no case for comparison, any more than the eternal man and woman question. They are diverse ; and the world has equal need of both. So there's consolation for us all !"

"Well played, Desmond!" Lenox remarked, smiling and nodding across the table at his wife.

"I surrender at discretion," she admitted sweetly. "But still, being an artist, I take off my hat to men of action, and always shall."

"Good luck for the men of action !" Desmond retorted, with an amused glance at Lenox, as they rose from the table.

By now cholera and fever were dying out slowly, like

spent fires. The Infantry had come in from camp ; and the Battery was expected back shortly, only two fresh cases having occurred. Then, as Honor began to mend, people dropped in again at tea-time, eager for news of her ; and Quita discovered how widely and deeply she was beloved. Little Mrs Peters disappeared behind a very crumpled handkerchief while trying to express her feelings ; and the Chicken blew his nose vigorously when Quita announced that Honor would soon be allowed into the drawing-room for tea.

She was getting used to her new name now. Officers of all ranks came to call on her as a 'bride' ; an embarrassing attention which she would gladly have dispensed with in the circumstances, since Eldred basely deserted her on each occasion ; and she was introduced to Norton, who inspected her critically and flagrantly, as a possible stumbling-block to a promising career. Altogether, she was beginning to see India in a new perspective. Hitherto, in her aimless wanderings with Michael, she had merely looked on at its vast and varied panorama of life ; had studied it with the detached interest of the outsider. Now she felt herself absorbed into the brotherhood of those who worked and suffered for the great country of her husband's service ; who were as flies on the wheels of its complex mechanism ; and who heartily loved or hated it, as the case might be.

At last, after a week of devoted nursing, Honor was allowed to make her first appearance in the drawing-room ; and Desmond invited a 'select few' to tea for the occasion. Wyndham stood alone on the hearth-rug when she entered, her husband supporting her with his arm. She was visibly thinner ; and her face was almost as colourless as the sweeping folds of her tea-gown. Otherwise her beauty had reasserted itself triumphantly ; and Wyndham caught his breath as he came towards her.

She gave him both her hands ; and he held them closely for a long moment. Then, obeying a rare and imperative impulse, he bent down and touched them with his lips. A faint colour tinged Honor's cheeks. "Dear Paul," she said under her breath : and Desmond, leading her to the sofa, established her in a nest of cushions, with a light

covering for her feet, just as Quita and Lenox came in, closely followed by Max Richardson in uniform.

He had come in from camp not an hour ago; and had ridden over without changing, in his zeal to shake hands with Lenox and his wife. The former had endured his congratulations and delight at the news with the best grace he could muster; and had avoided a word with him alone. Now he drew up a chair and sat down by Honor: while Quita, pricked to a passing jealousy by his instant gravitation to her, moved off with Max Richardson, talking and laughing as if she had known him for years. It was not her habit to waste time in preliminaries.

"They'll get on splendidly, those two," Honor said, smiling as she watched them.

"I'll be glad if they do," Lenox answered without enthusiasm; and her eyes scanned his face.

"You aren't getting on splendidly, though. You look worn to a shadow. I'm afraid it's been difficult."

"Hideously difficult."

"And you ought both to be so happy, now of all times . . ."

"Yes. That's the exquisitely refined torment of it."

"You haven't been sleeping?"

"No . . . nothing to speak of. But don't give yourself a headache on my account, dear lady. Desmond would never forgive me! I'm a tough customer. I shall pull through somehow."

"If you could only bring yourself to talk it over with Theo," she urged in a lower tone, as he came towards them with Mrs Peters, who flung shyness to the winds, and fairly took Honor's breath away by kissing her on both cheeks.

Desmond's 'select few' amounted to less than a dozen. Honor's sofa was the centre of attraction; and her sympathetic spirit thrilled in response to the friendliness that glowed, like a jewel, at the heart of everyday talk and laughter. For the past fortnight of pain and stress seemed to have drawn them all indefinitely closer to one another: which is the true mission of pain and stress in this very human world.

Later in the evening there were light sports on the

Cavalry parade-ground, which Meredith, Desmond, and Olliver were bound to attend; Wyndham and half a dozen others remaining behind.

Courtenay, on his way to the door, remarked to Lenox that a short outing would do him no harm; and Quita, who chanced to be standing at his elbow, pressed lightly against him.

"Drive me down, dear," she said softly. "I should love it." And since he had avoided her for the greater part of the morning, he could not well refuse.

"I like your 'Dick,' Eldred," she informed him, as they bowled along the wide straight road. "He is *bon garçon*, through and through. Not brilliant, perhaps: but quick, appreciative, and he can talk."

"Yes: Dick's a real good sort. Glad you approve of him. And as for talking . . . *you* could draw conversation out of a stone wall!"

"I don't always succeed with the one I am leaning against just now!"

"Well, I'll swear it's not your fault if you fail," he answered, smiling down upon her with such unfathomable sadness in his eyes, that she cried out involuntarily, between vexation and despair—

"Oh, *mon Dieu*, is it always going to be like this between us? Is there nothing I can do to make you happy again?"

"Nothing just at present, worse luck," he said grimly, looking straight ahead: for in the face of such an appeal he could hardly confess his desperate need to be left alone. "It's a question of time, as I told you, and my own strength of will. But if the situation becomes too intolerable for you, there is always the last resort of overstepping the limit, and setting you free for good."

Quita could not know how cruelly ill he had slept since her coming, nor how little a man tortured by insomnia can be held responsible for his utterances; and the significance of his last words so startled her that she clutched his arm.

"Eldred . . . Eldred, promise me you'll never even think of such a thing . . . never!"

He winced under her touch. "Quita, remember where we are," he said sharply; and she dropped her hand.

"But all the same, promise me . . . what I asked; or I shall never have an easy moment."

"It might come to seem the kindest thing one could do for you," he persisted, still without looking at her. But fear gave her courage to strike deep while the chance of speech was hers.

"It would never be anything less than an act of cruelty and cowardice. Remember that. I am ready to put up with everything . . . everything rather than lose you, now."

"If that's the truth, lass," he said with sudden gentleness, "you may set your mind at rest. I promise."

"Thank you, *mon cher*."

Then they fell silent till the parade-ground came in sight.

This, their first appearance together in public, was something of an ordeal to both; and at the last minute Quita's courage evaporated.

"Eldred . . . stop, please," she said suddenly. "I'm shy of them all; and I don't want to talk to them just now."

"Thank the Lord for that!" he answered so fervently, that they both laughed aloud; and there is nothing like laughter for clearing the air.

"Take me for a drive," she suggested. "Show me your bungalow . . . our bungalow, will you?"

He hesitated. It seemed he was only to exchange one ordeal for another. "It's a ramshackle, comfortless place, Quita," he objected. "Wouldn't it be better to wait till . . . till I can have it decently fitted up for you? Or you might like to pick another one."

"But no. I want that one; and I want to see it first just as you lived in it, please."

"Very well. If you wish it."

An officious chowkidar opened doors for them with a great clatter of bolts, and an elaborate air of being very much on the spot; and they stepped straight from the verandah into the one room Lenox had furnished besides the bedroom. It looked desolate, and smelt uninhabited; but Quita inspected the horns, the rugs, the sketches, even the handful of books left on the writing-table, with eager

interest: and Eldred, stationed on the hearth-rug, answered her running fire of questions a little vaguely, because he was listening more intently to her voice than to what it said!

Suddenly his thoughts were checked by a vivid sense of having lived through this identical scene before; of standing near a fireplace watching her light-hearted explorations. But where? When? Then, like a dash of cold water, came enlightenment. It was at the Riffel Alp Hotel, on the day of their wedding; and the bitterness of the lost years between, with their final heritage of evil, flowed over him like the sluggish waters of a dead sea.

Quita was hesitating on the threshold of the bedroom now; and an insane conviction came upon him that if she went in there he would lose her again, as on that earlier day. It was all sheer brain-sickness, and lack of sleep, but at the moment it was horribly real.

"May one look at the other rooms too?" she asked. "I want to see which would do best for my studio!"

"Look into every hole and corner, if it amuses you, dearest," he answered; but made no attempt to accompany her.

When at last she reappeared, the nightmare feeling took him afresh. He felt certain she would come straight up to him, and lay hold of the lapels of his coat. And this she actually did; lifting a glowing face to his.

"Eldred," she began, exactly as before . . . and it was more than he could stand. The oppression of her nearness set the blood rushing in his ears; and taking her hands from their resting-place he put her from him, almost an arm's-length, as though the better to look into her eyes.

"Well?" he asked, with an attempt at lightness that rang false. "Is your Highness quite satisfied with it all?"

But she was not to be deceived. Her cheeks flamed; and she almost snatched away her hands.

"Yes. I am quite satisfied," she said, in a changed voice. "And I think it's high time we went back."

Then she left him, a shade too rapidly for dignity, and sprang into the cart, before he could get near enough to help her up.

"Quita . . . why did you do that? What's wrong?" he asked, lamely enough as he gathered up the reins.

"Need you add insult to injury by asking that?" she flashed out, angry tears pricking her eyeballs. "I'm wrong. You're wrong. Everything's wrong. I ought never to have come here . . . before I was wanted."

He made no comment on that. It was not a question to be discussed in the open road, with a *sais* jogging on the tail-board behind; and no more was said till they reached home.

Then, as Eldred pressed the reins under the clip, he said in a quiet tone of command: "Stay where you are, please, till I can get round." And for all the rebellion in her blood, she obeyed.

He lifted her out bodily, and drew her into the hall. It was empty and almost dark: and before she guessed his intent, his lips had touched hers lightly, with a quick sigh that told of passion held in check. But she broke away from him, unappeased, and shut herself into her room.

She was relieved to find that a sprinkling of the tea party—the Ollivers, Norton, and Richardson—had stayed to dinner. Olliver was her partner; and evinced his appreciation of the fact by chaffing her laboriously throughout the meal; the one form of conversation she frankly detested.

But Richardson sat on her right, and, in Olliver's phraseology, "made the running with her all the time." For good, single-hearted Max frankly admired her. His conscience pricked him more acutely than it had yet done at thought of his own responsibility for the wasted years; and he longed for a chance to say as much to his friend. But Lenox was not in a mood to talk about his wife; and Richardson got no word in private with him throughout the evening.

Frank Olliver left early; and as Desmond half-lifted his wife from the sofa, Quita came up and said good-night also. She had been watching these two with reawakened interest throughout the afternoon and evening, and wondering whether she and Eldred could ever arrive at such perfect community of heart and mind.

In passing her husband, she laid butterfly finger-tips

upon his coat-sleeve. "Good-night, *mon ami*," she said, just framing the words with her lips: and before he could get a square look at her, she was gone.

When the three men were left alone, Wyndham drank his 'peg' standing, and departed; but Desmond took Lenox by the arm.

"Come into the *dufta*¹ for half an hour," he said. "I've hardly spoken to you since Monday; and I think we have a thing or two to talk over."

Lenox submitted with a smile of resigned amusement; and the study door closed behind them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I dare not swerve
From my soul's rights; a slave, though serving thee.
I but forbear more nobly to deserve;
The free gift only cometh of the free."

—O. MEREDITH.

"WELL, old chap?"

Lenox tried to speak carelessly; to evade the inevitable; for he was sore, with the twofold soreness of insomnia and thwarted passion; and when all a man's nerves are laid bare, he naturally dreads a touch in the wrong place:—hence irascibility. To any one else he would have presented an impenetrable curtain of reserve, of ironical refusal to admit that anything was wrong. But Desmond had the man's tenderness, which is sometimes greater than the woman's: and, as Quita had once said, he was privileged, simply by being what he was.

Having set glasses and spirit-decanter within reach of their two chairs, he came over to Lenox, and set both hands on his shoulders.

"My dear fellow, it's no use shirking facts," he said straightly. "You're only flesh and blood; and the strain of all this is just knocking you to pieces again. No reflection on your wife. You know what I mean?"

¹ Study.

"Yes. I know very well what you mean." Lenox spoke with repressed bitterness. "I once heard hell defined as disqualification in the face of opportunity."

Desmond turned back to the table, and helped himself to a fresh cigar. "Are you so dead certain about the disqualification?" he asked without looking up: and he heard Lenox grind his teeth.

"Oh Lord, man, if you're going on that tack, I'm off."

"Indeed you're not. There's a deal more to be said. As far as I understand matters, I imagine that your wife's coming here makes a decided difference in regard to—ultimate possibilities?"

"Yes; that's just it. She has cut away the ground from under my feet on all sides." He was thinking of his promise that afternoon, and his voice lost its schooled hardness. "She's set on going through with things, at any price. But then . . . she doesn't realise . . ."

"Believe me, it wouldn't make the smallest difference if she did. Women are made that way, to our eternal good fortune. Their capacity for loving us in spite of what we are is a thing to go down on one's knees for. You'll appreciate it, one of these days, if you haven't done so already."

"Appreciate it? Great Scott, Desmond, haven't I ten times more cause to do so than *you* can ever have had? But that doesn't wipe out facts or principles."

He left the hearth-rug, and paced the room in restless agitation. Desmond sat down, lit his cigar, and waited. His own suggestion could best be made if Lenox could be induced to unburden himself a little first. Presently he sat on the edge of the writing-table, well out of range of the lamp; stretched out his long legs, and folded his arms.

"By rights, I suppose I ought to have let her go back to Dalhousie at once. She suggested it herself. But it seemed too brutal; and I wasn't up to the wrench of letting her go just then. Besides, there was your wife's illness. It would have been out of the question. And now I'm in a bigger hole than before. We are living at cross purposes. She sees I'm holding back; and she's puzzled, and unhappy. But how the deuce is a man to tell her plainly that by an act of pure pluck

and devotion, at the wrong moment, she has practically pushed me deeper into the pit than I've been yet? In fact, I'm beginning to be afraid that . . . the damage may be permanent."

Desmond stifled an exclamation of dismay.

"I wonder if you could bring yourself to tell me exactly what you mean by that?" he said quietly. "Perhaps I have no business to ask; but unless one goes to the root of a thing it's useless to talk of it at all."

"I know that. If I hadn't meant to tell you, I shouldn't be in here now. The fact is . . . it's gone a good bit beyond tobacco this last fortnight." He hesitated: but Desmond made no sign. "Did you never miss that bottle of chlorodyne you brought me the day I was bowled over?"

This time Desmond started.

"Good heavens, yes! I had to get a fresh one . . . for Honor. But it never occurred to me . . ."

"It wouldn't. You're not the sort. I emptied it, though, in no time. But it's poor stuff. It didn't half work. Then, one night—I was mad with pain, and want of sleep—I got hold of the raw drug, in pellets—from the bazaar." He shivered at the recollection: "I tell you, Desmond, it's appalling to feel the foundations of things giving way. But I've taken it ever since, . . . pain or no.—*Now* do you doubt the disqualification I spoke of? Personally I don't feel fit to touch her hand."

The bitterness of conviction in his tone made Desmond lean forward to get a better sight of him.

"Lenox, old man," he said, almost tenderly, "such exaggerated notions are all a part of your unsettled nerves.—Smash up your devil's box of pills; or . . . hand it over to me . . . if you will . . . ?"

Lenox hesitated; but his face gave no sign of the short sharp struggle within. "You shall have the thing, if you wish it," he said at length. "It gives me no pleasure to make a beast of myself. But that doesn't touch the heart of the difficulty. So long as she's here, I haven't a chance. If I give up the stuff, I shall go to pieces with headache and insomnia. That's flat."

"Indeed I think you're mistaken." Desmond spoke

with deliberate lightness. "At all events, I have a suggestion to make that may help you . . for the moment. I have quite decided that Honor must leave this, directly she is strong enough to stand the short journey to Sheik Budeen ; probably in three or four days ; and after a week or two there, she must go on to Dalhousie till September. Can you see a chink of daylight now ?"

"Why, naturally. You want Quita to go up with her ? A capital notion !"

His eagerness was an unconscious revelation of all that he had endured.

"Yes. I want you to tell her, from me, that she would be doing us both a very real kindness. Honor would break her poor heart alone at Sheik Budeen ; and if you put it to Quita that way, I don't think she will take your suggestion amiss."

"I'm positive she won't. I'll speak to her to-morrow."

He got up ; squared his shoulders, with a great sigh of relief ; helped himself to whisky-and-soda ; and emptied half the tumbler at a draught.

"By Jove, Desmond, you've put fresh spirit into me. This will give me a chance to fight the thing squarely ; and I hope to God I may succeed,—even yet."

"Of course you'll succeed. We may take that for granted," Desmond answered, smiling. "You've won the great talisman that puts failure out of the question. As soon as we are officially through with the cholera, you should take sick leave, and go off into the hills. You'll not fight to any purpose, till you're in sound health again."

"How about Dick, though ? It's his turn for leave."

"He'll survive missing it. He's in splendid condition ; and this is a life-and-death matter for you. Besides, Courtenay will never let you start duty till you've been away. 'Dick' can take fifteen days when you get back."

"Poor chap ! But I'm afraid that's the only programme possible."

He sat down at last ; and for a time they smoked contentedly ; then Lenox drew a letter from his breast-pocket.

"From Sir Henry Forsyth at Simla," he explained, "about my chances up Gilgit way. If we decide on re-

establishing the Agency there, he evidently counts on sending me up again, with young Travers as my Assistant. He and I have done some decent work together in that part of the world. Nothing I should like better, of course. But . . . in the face of recent developments, I swear I don't know how to answer him."

He handed the letter to Desmond, who read it and looked thoughtful.

"If you get this chance, I think you must take it," he said. "With your special knowledge, you'd be the right man in the right place, up there: and apart from your own ambition, you owe something to India, after what you've done already."

Lenox sighed.

"I owe something to my wife also. You'd be the last to deny that.—Jove, it's amazing what a fine crop of complications will grow out of one false step. A little want of frankness on her part; a little over-hastiness on mine; . . . and see where we've travelled in consequence. All my work in the past five years has been tending towards something of this kind. But it would never do . . . for Quita. Think what a life for a woman, even if one could hope to have her there in time. Shut up in the heart of the hills, with half a dozen Englishmen, and a husband who might end in going to the devil. Not another woman nearer than Srinagar; and communication with India cut off for six months in the year. No. One would never get permission. It would simply wrench us apart again.—There seems to be a Fate against this marriage of mine every way. My fault, no doubt. Perhaps as a soldier with a taste for exploration, I was a fool to go in for it at all."

Desmond leaned forward, and flicked the ash from his cigar.

"Nonsense, man," he said emphatically. "You're talking heresy and schism! Soldier or no soldier, I believe in marriage. Always have done. With all its difficulties, it's an incomparable bond; as you'll find out, once you two are on the right footing. But you're hardly fit enough yet to see things in their true perspective. All this Gilgit business is still a good way ahead: and I can

only say that if it does come to spending a good part of your service up in the wilds, you could not have chosen a woman more fitted for it than Quita. The better one knows her, the more one admires her . . .”

The other's face softened.

“She's as straight and as plucky as a man,” he said simply. “And whatever comes of it, I'm a lucky devil to be her husband.—Think I'll turn in now, and try for a little sleep. I never meant to inflict my affairs on you like this. But you bring it on yourself, Desmond, by being so confoundedly sympathetic!”

Before the two men parted, the box of opium pills had changed hands: and Lenox, by way of trying for a little sleep, lit a fresh cigar,—he was beginning to tolerate them now,—and went out into the garden.

Its open spaces were saturated with moonlight; while trees and bushes, solitary or huddled together, stood in black pools of shadow, and fragments of curded cloud trailed across the sky. Absorbed in thought, Lenox crossed a stretch of lawn set with rose-beds; and turning at the far end strolled back towards the house, that loomed, an unwieldy mass of shadow, against the palpitating radiance beyond.

The light in his own room showed through the split bamboo of the ‘chick’ in hair-line streaks of brightness; but from the door next his own it issued in a wide stream that lost itself in the moon-splashed verandah. Quita had rolled up her ‘chick,’ and stood leaning against the door-post in an attitude that suggested weariness, or despondency, or both; the tall slender form of her thrown into strong relief by the light within. He knew that she must have seen him; and his hope was that she would come out and say good-night to him. Since he must speak, it would be a relief to speak at once, and get it over. It might even be possible to sleep, if matters could be definitely settled between them without further discord; otherwise, bereft of the opium, his chances were small indeed.

But though he drew steadily nearer, she remained motionless; to all appearance unaware of his presence. But the mere craving to touch her, to hear her voice, grew

stronger every minute; and he was not to be thwarted thus. At the verandah's edge he paused.

"Quita," he said, scarcely above his breath.

"Yes."

"Have you forgiven me?"

"No. Not quite."

"But I want you."

"Come to me, then." A slight movement suggested a defiant tilt of her chin.

The verandah itself stood more than two feet above the ground; but instead of going round by the steps, he sprang up on it, flung away his cigar, and stood before her with proffered hands.

She surrendered her own.

"Now?" he asked, smiling.

"N. no."

He stooped and kissed her hair.

"Now, perhaps?"

"Yes, . . . almost. Though I'm not sure that you deserve it."

"I don't," he answered humbly, taking the wind out of her sails.

Then objects in the room behind her caught his attention:—her dressing-table, with its silver-backed brushes and hand-glass, its dainty feminine litter; her blue dressing-gown flung over a chair; and, tucked away in a corner, her small comfortless bed.

"Come out into the garden, away from all this," he said hurriedly, almost angrily. "Why on earth did you drag me up here?"

"Because it's the man's place to come to the woman," she answered, with a demure dignity more provocative than tenderness. "It has been too much the other way round between us lately. As one has to suffer from the drawbacks of being a woman, one may as well enjoy the advantages also."

"And having enjoyed them, will you graciously descend to come out there with me?"

"But yes; of course I will."

He turned on his heel; and they went out together. In the strong Indian moonlight her soft blue dinner-dress,

sweeping the grass behind her, was blanched to a silvery pallor; her bare neck and arms gleamed like marble touched into life; and unconsciously she swayed a little towards him as she walked, like a tall flower in a breeze. The radiant mystery of earth and sky, the scarcely less radiant mystery of womanhood beside him, conspired with her veiled mood of gentle aloofness to strike his defences from him. But he kept his hands in his pockets by way of safeguard; and because he had small skill in broaching a difficult subject, he held his tongue.

Half-way across the lawn, she came deliberately closer.

"You know, you hurt me cruelly this afternoon, Eldred."

"Did I, lass? That was abominable of me. But you must make allowances, even if you don't understand. I'm a man, and you're a woman. That seems to be the root of the difficulty. And now I'm half afraid I may hurt you again."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a clumsy brute; and I do it without meaning to. But I suppose it's plain to you that we can't go on much longer as we are doing now?"

"Of course we can't." She let out a breath of relief. "I've been wondering when you were going to see that."

"I have seen it all along. Only, for the life of me, I didn't know how to make the next move. But I have just had a talk with Desmond, . . . about his wife. He wants to send her to Sheik Budeen, the minute she's fit to spend a night in a doolie."

"Where . . . and what . . . is Sheik Budeen?"

The perceptible change in her tone disconcerted him. But the thing had to be got through; and he went ahead without swerving.

"It is an apology for a Hill Station, about fifty miles north of this. Just a handful of bungalows, on an ugly desolate rock, rising straight out of the plain. No trees; no water, except what they collect in a tank for use. But being nearly four thousand feet up, it's a few degrees cooler than this: and probably after a week or two there Mrs Desmond would be fit to stand the journey to Dalhousie."

It was characteristic of him that he made no attempt to soften facts: and Quita, edging a little away from him, lifted her head.

"Is it settled when one is to start for this inviting spot?" she asked, critically examining a distant star.

"In a few days, if Mackay agrees. Poor Desmond, he hates letting his wife go. But for her sake he wants to get her away from here as soon as possible."

"I see. And you want to get *me* away from here as soon as possible. It's a very convenient arrangement for you both."

Her implication stabbed him. He stood still, and faced her; his eyes full of pain. But he made no attempt to touch her: which was a mistake.

She stood still also,—head uplifted, hands clasped behind her,—without discontinuing her scrutiny of the heavens.

"By the Lord, you are hitting back harder than I deserve," he reproached her desperately. "At least you might believe of me all that I said of Desmond, . . . that it is for your sake, and that I shall hate letting you go. The suggestion was entirely his own. He asked me to tell you, from him, that you would be doing them both a very real kindness by going with Mrs Desmond; and I thought . . . you would be glad of a chance to help either of them; especially since you must know, after all I said at Kajiar, that it is impossible . . . yet for us to start fair and square."

It was a long speech for Eldred, and it brought her down from the stars.

"Naturally I am delighted to do anything on earth for the Desmonds," she said sweetly, ignoring his final remark. "You speak as if I might refuse to go. But I haven't fallen quite so low as that."

"Quita, have you *no* mercy on a man?" he flashed out between anger and pain. "There has never been any question of 'falling' on your side, and you know it. But surely you understand that, in spite of all that has happened between, what I dared not to do a month ago, I dare not do now."

"Do you mean . . . is . . . the trouble not any less?"

“No.”

“But I thought you were going . . . to fight it?”

“So I am; so I shall, till I break it, or it breaks me. But look back over the past few weeks, and ask yourself if I have had much of a chance so far.”

She unclasped her hands and looked up at him, speech hovering in her eyes. But she dropped them again, and stood so, with bowed head, shifting her rings nervously up and down her slim third finger.

“Dear lass, what’s troubling you?” he asked. “We’ve got to understand one another to-night; so don’t be afraid to speak out. Better make a clean wound and have done with it, than think hard things of me that may be unjust. Tell me the thought I saw in your eyes.”

“I was thinking of something Michael said.” She spoke in an even voice without looking up.

“Michael? Well . . . what was it?” Anxiety sharpened his tone.

“He said that if . . . if you really . . . wanted me back again, your conscientious scruples would be swept away like straws before a flood. I wouldn’t believe him then. But now . . . I’m afraid it’s true.”

“Confound the man! What does he know about my scruples?” Lenox broke out with irrepressible vehemence; and she looked up quickly.

“Please don’t be violent, Eldred. You told me to speak out. Besides, Michael is my brother.”

“I’m sorry. But if he were ten times your brother, I’d say the same. He had no business to try and set you against me like that.” He caught her unresisting hands now, and held them fast.

“You take Michael’s word against mine . . . is that so?” he asked, a dull flush rising in his face; and he tried to look into her eyes. But she would not have it.

“Oh, my dear, can’t you see it’s not,” she said, so low that he scarcely heard her. “It’s . . . your own actions, contradicting your own words, that make me feel he must be right.”

Lenox stood aghast at this new and unanswerable aspect of the case; at the knowledge that, in respect of practical proof to the contrary, his hands were tied.

"Good God! what can a man do to convince you?" he demanded on a note of smothered passion. "Quita . . my very wife, look me in the eyes, and answer me straight. Do you honestly believe that I have been insulting you with mere lip-service all this while?"

He stood before her in mingled dignity and humility, trying to master himself, to find some admissible outlet for the tumult of feeling that was undermining the foundations of his will. But she did not answer at once; nor did she look up.

"Think how I welcomed you a week ago," he urged.

"I do think of it. But . . since then . . ." She hesitated; and a slow wave of colour crimsoned her neck and face, even to her forehead. "I . . I don't know what to believe," she added very low.

The words struck away his last defences, and he caught her in his arms; straining her to him, and kissing her almost roughly on lips and eyes and throat. She submitted at first, in sheer amazement and half-frightened joy at having roused him thus. Then she tried to free herself; but he held her close, and hard.

"Do you believe now," he asked, his lips at her ear, "that I want you . . that I love you . . with every part of me, heart, and mind, and body?"

For all answer she leaned her head against him with a broken sob.

"Oh, Eldred," she rebuked him through her tears. "I never knew you could behave . . like that!"

"No more did I," he answered bluntly. "Forgive me, darling, if you can. I was a brute to lose control of myself. But you pushed me too far. There are things no man of human passions can put up with; and if you are going to begin by doubting my sincerity, all hope of real union between us is at an end."

"Dear love, I promise I'll never doubt it again," she whispered fervently. "I'll go away, and stay away . . without any fuss, if only I can see things straight and clear; if only you won't quite shut me out from the best part of yourself."

"I've no notion of shutting you out from any part of myself, you precious woman. But the habit of half a

lifetime is not easy to break through; and I suppose that when two people marry they have to learn one another bit by bit, like a new language; except in such a rare case as the Desmonds, where love and understanding are not two things, but one, like the man and woman themselves. There . . . did you ever guess I had thought all that about marriage!"

She laughed contentedly.

"No. How could I? And it's your thoughts I want, Eldred;—the hidden you, that belongs to no one but me."

"Do you, though? It sounds rather wholesale! But I'll do my best."

"Come over and sit on the steps; and I'll try to tell you just how matters stand, and how I feel about it all."

He led her back to the verandah, and establishing her on the topmost step, seated himself lower down, one arm passed behind her, his left hand covering hers that lay folded in her lap. Quita, looking down upon it in a flutter of happiness, noted and approved it as an epitome of the man: large, without clumsiness, nervous and full of character.

Then he told her, simply and straightly, a part of what he had told Desmond; and more, that was for herself alone. Through all he said, and left unsaid, Quita felt the force of his ascetic personality, of a strong man, stern with himself and his own passion; and, womanlike, thrilled at thought of her dominion over him; her power to set him vibrating by a word, a look, a touch. Yet she listened without movement or interruption; for the which he blessed her in his heart.

"I suppose there are numbers of men who would take . . . what I refuse without a twinge of conscience," he said finally. "But the fact that I should be acting dead against the right, as I see it, would make capitulation wrong for me, . . . if not for them. Besides, one dare not trifle with an inherited evil. One's only chance lies in taking strong measures on the spot. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand . . . now; though I didn't at first. And I wouldn't have you different by one hair's-breadth, though your strength and single-mindedness does make things harder for both of us."

He pressed her hands.

"It's worth all I've been through, and more, to hear you say that. Only remember, lass, it's not simply a question of principles that may seem to you high-flown, but of bed-rock facts. I don't want to enlarge on the ugly or painful side of a very ugly subject; but I do want you to understand that not only my career, but our whole future happiness depends upon my crushing out this habit before it degenerates to a craving; before my conscience gets blunted, my will-power undermined. Opium is worse than drink in both respects: and if things ever reached such a pass—which God forbid—it would mean losing my commission; just going under, like dozens of ill-fated chaps, and sinking in the scale: or at best scraping along in the army by means of constant subterfuges, at the hourly risk of discovery and disgrace. A nice sort of life for you, my proud little woman. And for——" he broke off short.

She tried to speak, but tears were clutching at her throat; and after a moment's pause, he went on: "There is a great black something deep down in me, Quita, that rises up now and then, like a spiritual fog, and blots all the light and colour out of life. This, and the dread of those hideous possibilities I spoke of, made me feel, a month ago, as if it might be better for you to be left in comparative freedom, than chained to a man with a devil inside him. But your coming down here has put all that out of the question."

"Thank God I came, then."

"Yes. Thank God you came," he echoed fervently. "Though I was afraid you didn't quite realise . . ."

"Dear, I did. More than you imagine. But I wanted . . . to help you in spite of yourself; and I hoped we could fight it out together."

He shook his head.

"Don't think me brutal, Quita, but a man's got to fight out this sort of thing alone with his own soul . . . and God. You can only help just by . . loving me, and believing that I shall pull through. Dear old Desmond has done about as much for me as one human being seems permitted to do for another in big contingencies."

cies; and, by the way, he said rather a charming thing to-night."

"He has a gift for that. What was it?"

"He said I won the great talisman that put failure out the question."

She laughed again, softly.

"Oh, how I love that man, and his incurable idealism!"

"You do? You lawless young woman! How many more?"

"Only one more . . I think!"

And freeing her left hand she slipped it round his head, that was on a level with her shoulder, drew it close against her, and ran her fingers lightly through his thick hair.

"I'm going to weave a magic over your head to make you sleep, and reward you for giving up the opium, you poor, poor darling."

And with a sigh Lenox yielded himself to the ecstasy of her touch.

Their talk grew fitful, and fragmentary; intimate lover's talk, interspersed with luminous pauses, that were but hidden channels of speech; till Quita felt the walls within walls giving way under her 'magic,' and knew that she had reached the shy, inmost heart of the man at last. That enchanted hour lifted them beyond the ardours of passion, to the mastery of spirit; to a passing revelation of the eternal beauty underlying earth's tragedies and complexities: and both were conscious of an exalted strength.

The harsh clanging of the police gong, twelve times repeated, brought them back to the iron facts of life. With a murmur of reluctance they rose; and Lenox escorted his wife to the door of her room.

"Shall I let down your 'chick' for you?" he asked.

"Please."

He untied the strings that held it up. Then, as the curtain fell between them and the lamplit room, Quita turned, and with a gesture all tenderness, laid both arms round his neck.

"I shall never forget to-night, Eldred," she whispered, "even if we live to be cross prosaic old people together."

You may go to the other end of the world, now, and stay there as long as you like! I am sure of you; and I feel in every fibre of me that we are going to win through in the end."

CHAPTER XXV.

"In a hundred ages of the gods I could not tell thee of the glory of Himachal. As the dew is dried up by the sun, so are the sins of mankind, by the glory of Himachal."—*From the Hindu.*

THAT night Eldred Lenox slept long, and dreamlessly; and awoke with new life throbbing in his veins. The three uneventful days that followed were among the happiest in his life; and on the fourth, before sunset, the two women set out, in hospital doolies, on their primitive journey to Sheik Budeen.

Honor had protested, almost to tears, at being compelled to spend a fortnight with her heart in two places, and her body in a third! But Desmond, reinforced by John Meredith, had held his own; promising to escort her to the barren Rock of Refuge, whose only virtue was its elevation; and, by arranging a relay of ponies along the route, gallop back in time for 'orderly room' next morning. "Which is more than nine husbands out of ten would do for a headstrong wife!" Meredith had concluded, stroking her flushed cheek: and thus the matter had been settled.

Lenox and Quita spent the last afternoon together in their own bungalow, at her suggestion. The officious chowkidar unearthed two punkah coolies for the occasion: and the planning of their future home, a picnic tea served on Eldred's writing-table, and practical considerations in respect of furniture and house linen—though Quita had small inherent regard for either!—helped, more or less, to obscure the thought of separation. Before leaving the bungalow, she won through the dreaded last injunctions and kisses without ignominious collapse, since Lenox was

to ride out for a few miles beside the doolie; and they parted finally with brave words, and a prolonged hand-clasp that left her fingers tingling for a good five minutes afterwards.

Quita never forgot that journey. Its weird fascination, clashing with the ache of parting, stamped every detail indelibly upon her memory:—the vast, featureless plain, empty as a widow's heart; the lavish moonlight poured out upon it like water, flowing unhesitated to the naked spurs of the frontier hills, whose huge shoulders, peaks, and escarpments blotted out the stars along the western horizon; the occasional appearance of wild-looking Waziri militia-men, from the chain of outposts along the foot-hills, who had been warned to keep up a sharp look-out along the road: no villages; no trees; no sound or movement anywhere, save the distorted shadows and rhythmical grunting of her doolie-bearers, the soft shuffling of their feet, and the click of hoofs, as Desmond rode at a foot's pace beside his wife, or dismounting, walked and talked with her, his bridle slung over his arm.

The suggestion of tenderness and companionship in their low tones seemed to accentuate the lifeless desolation through which they moved, the blankness and uncertainty of the anxious months ahead. Possibly something of this occurred to Desmond; for after the first few miles he deserted his wife now and again, and walked by Quita; exorcising the spirit of self-torment that haunts the imaginative, as he of all men best knew how to do.

Finally, lulled by the movement of the doolie, she fell asleep; and awoke to find herself in a changed world: a world of rough-cut volcanic rock and boulder, piled up on either hand in fantastic disarray; a world of white light and sharp black shadows; of mystery, and terror, and uncanny beauty. It was as if she had been transported back to the morning of Time, when the earth giants wrenched up the mountains, and pelted one another in pure sport: and as she flung back the loose flap of her doolie to get a wider view of it all, Desmond trotted up to her.

“It's less alarming than it looks,” he reassured her. “We have only turned off into the Paizu Pass. It's a nasty dangerous bit of road; but our own men are on

ahead, so we're safe enough. We shall be climbing the hill directly ; and I'll be uncommonly glad of my *chota hazri*."

" You deserve it, you poor fellow ! But it sounds an anachronism ! I can't believe that anything so commonplace as a bungalow, with servants and tea and toast, exists within a hundred miles of this primeval nakedness."

But in the fulness of time, bungalow, tea, and servants were all forthcoming : and between three and four of the morning their fantastic journey culminated in a prosaic meal of eggs and buttered toast. When it was over Quita vanished, leaving Desmond alone with his wife ; and before moonset he was speeding back along the road they had come ; covering the fifty miles at a hand-gallop, in something less than five hours.

A fortnight later two very unwilling grass-widows were rescued by Lenox, who had secured his sick leave ; and who escorted them from Dera Ishmael as far as Lahore, where he left them to go on into the mountain region beyond Kashmir.

Hillmen have a saying, 'Who goes to the hills goes to his mother' ; and Eldred Lenox, a hillman both by love and lineage, confirmed it for the hundredth time, as he pushed his way upward, by leisurely enchanting stages, from the steaming Punjab, through the great natural gateway of the Baramullah Pass, a towering defile, thunderous with full-fed torrents and waterfalls, into the familiar Valley, . . . a very sanctuary of peace ; its terraced slopes splashed with the vivid green of rice-fields, the russet and gold of ripe orchards and cornlands ; up through Srinagar, 'the City of the Sun,' of carved and gilded temples, thronged waterways, and flat house-tops blazoned with flowers ; and yet again upward, by ways well known to him, into the hidden mysteries of the mountains massed about the valleys ; a mighty conclave of immortals brooding in majestic meditation ; shrouded at this season by dazzling continents of cloud ; and plunging green arms to the rivers and lakes, that gleamed like molten silver under a pale sky.

To know a character rightly it should be seen in its natural element ; and the Lenox of the Himalayas was by no means the same man as the Lenox of the Plains. All his latent energy and vigour blossomed out like flowers at the first whisper of spring. ‘The glory of Himachal’ drew and penetrated and inspired him like nothing else on earth.

Here he tracked and brought down nilghai, markhor, and the great mountain sheep ; explored on a small scale, because the fever of going was upon him ; and slept as a man only sleeps when he is living close to the heart of Nature. Here, also,—fortified by solitude, by the uplifting sense of things awful and divine which is the gift of great mountains to those who love them,—he fought doggedly and systematically against a craving that persisted in spite of improved health. For the tyranny of opium is as tenacious as it is deadly ; and the habit of five years is not to be broken in as many weeks. But the man who wills to conquer evil has God and Nature fighting on his side : and in the teeth of several flagrant lapses, Lenox made steady progress.

In Srinagar he bought a bottle of chlorodyne ; and two days later flung it down the *khud*. When his store of drugged tobacco ran out, he replaced it by a brand in which an innocuous admixture of opium just sufficed to produce the faint fragrance that he loved. The black fits of melancholy, which were native to his temperament, and which, in the past five years, had threatened to dominate him permanently, evaporated like morning fogs before the sun as the certainty grew in him that he must prevail : and Quita, who had done most of the harm, made unconscious reparation by letters whose consummate faith in the final issue was stimulating as the mountain air itself.

By October he was back at Dera Ishmael Khan ;—a renewed man, bronzed and vigorous, the shadow gone from his eyes ; testing his achievement and finding that it held good ; bending all his energies to the task of fitting up a home for his wife ; a task whereof Honor usurped as large a share as he would permit. Then, towards the end of the month, he wrote to Quita : “Come. We are ready, and

waiting for you,—the house, Zyarulla, Brutus, and your impatient husband, who will pick you up at Lahore."

And on the last day of October, more than six years after their hasty wedding, Eldred and Quita Lenox entered upon their married life.

"Have you forgotten, darling, the nonsense I talked that day about the House, and the Enchanted Palace?" she asked, as they stood together on their first evening in the drawing-room, whose every detail he had planned with elaborate care.

"Is it likely? Why?"

His arm was round her shoulders; and putting up one hand she touched his face.

"Why . . . because I said we would have to begin with the House. But we seem to have reached the Enchanted Palace before starting after all?"

"By a very roundabout route," he answered, a suspicion of the old sadness in his eyes.

"Yes; but we *have* reached it. That's the main point, dear Pessimist; and the commonplace House I offered you has tumbled into a dust-heap of ruins. Don't let's build it up again, whatever else we may do in the way of foolishness. Retrogression is the one unforgiveable sin!"

It is the instinctive cry of love in the first flush of fulfilment. The grand impulsion of man to woman brushes aside lesser considerations like so many flies. But Life and Temperament, standing discreetly in the background, will have their say in the 'fateful second act' of the human comedy before the curtain drops.

BOOK IV.—THE VALLEY OF DECISION.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“Climb high, love high, what matter? Still . . .
Feet, feelings, must descend the hill.”

—BROWNING.

ON a certain afternoon of early March, Quita Lenox stood at her easel, in the small room she had fitted up as a studio, palette in one hand, long-handled brush in the other, two broken lines of irritation between her brows.

The verandah door stood wide; and through it the breath of spring came in to her, velvet soft, compact of a hundred nameless scents, mingled with the paramount scent of roses. For March is India's rose month: and in the midst of so much that is unlovely, the roses of Dera Ishmael Khan are things to marvel at, and thank Heaven for. Quita's rambling compound was packed with them, from the plebeian Cabbage, to the lordly Maréchal Neil. Three golden buds of the latter drooped over the white ribbon bow at her waist: and a bowl of dark red ones stood on the untidy table behind her.

But even the subtle-sweet influence of the day failed to sooth the creases out of her forehead. For the panel picture on her easel would not ‘behave’; her scattered ideas refused to range themselves: and the fount of inspiration seemed dried up within her: trifles insignificant enough to the ‘lay’ mind: but for the artist, whether of pencil, or brush, or chisel, they spell despair. All the morning she had wrestled with the picture half defiantly, as it were against the stream. Such work is seldom satisfactory; and since lunch she had been engaged in blotting it all out ruthlessly, bit by bit.

The refractory creation of her spirit was a small panel in oils : a subject picture, more or less symbolical, such as she did not often attempt:—a broken hillside, of Himalayan character: bare blocks of granite, dripping with recent rain, their dark corners and interstices alight with shy wild flowers and ferns: a stone-set path zigzagging among them, and half-way up the path, the figures of a man and woman: the man ahead, upon a jutting ledge of rock, half turning with down-stretched hand to draw the woman up after him, his vigorous form backed by a sky of driving cloud. Of the woman's face, as she lifted it to his, nothing could be seen save the outline of cheek and brow. Her bowed shoulders and the lines of her figure expressed effort, tinged with weariness. Below her, the topmost half of a deodar sprang upward, a suggestion of wind in its drooping bows: and through torn grey cloud, a sun-ray, striking across the two figures, waked coppery gleams in the woman's dark hair, and points of brightness on drenched rock and fern.

All these things were as yet conveyed rather than expressed: the figures, in particular, being still little more than studies suggesting both the strain and exhilaration of ascent. On a strip of cardboard propped above the canvas, four lines were scribbled in pencil.

“Does the road wind up-hill all the way ?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day ?

From morn till night, my friend.”

Quita read and pondered the words for the hundredth time: but the hint of melancholy in them only increased her vague feeling of annoyance, and the lines deepened between her brows.

It was her first serious attempt at a picture after four months of idleness, and ‘amateur scribblings’—so she designated them in her letters to Michael; and for the time being brain and hand seemed to have lost their cunning. She needed the stimulant of criticism, of discussion, to oil the wheels and set the machine going afresh. If only Michael were here, how they would have argued and squabbled, to their souls’ content, over values,

and proportions and effects of light and shade ; and what a fine day's work would have sprung from it all !

" I really think I must get him down here for a week or two," she thought. " Just to give me a fillip in the right direction."

Fired by the notion, she made one or two ineffectual dabs at the woman's draperies : then, flinging down brush and palette, sank into a deep, cushioned chair sacred to her husband, as a small table bearing ash-tray, pipes, and a pile of corrected proofs, bore witness. She glanced through them lazily, with softened eyes : then, as if drawn by a magnet, her gaze returned to the picture.

" Horrid depressing thing ! " she reflected. " And yet . . how attractive ! The general character of it is rather like Eldred himself. I suppose I could produce nothing that wasn't at this stage ! They are both up-hill subjects, certainly ; worth tackling ; and not to be mastered in a day."

But for all that she was little used to wrestling with her art. The touch of genius in her was of the spontaneous, rather than of the painstaking order ; and a remembered word of Michael's rose up to disconcert her. " Succumb to your womanhood and there is an end of you Art." Irritating man ! What business had he to make random shots so near to the truth. Yet it was not the whole truth ; and hers was the chance to prove it.

Certainly for the past six months and more, she had succumbed unreservedly to her womanhood ; had endured without a pang the temporary eclipse of her art. What need to strive after the presentation, the expression of life, when she had penetrated to the core of it: was living it buoyantly, fervently, with every faculty of heart and spirit ? By nature a being of extremes, she was apt to fling all her energies in one direction at a time : and in these last months of so-called idleness she had been mastering the rudiments of the finest and most complex of all arts,—the art of living in closest human relationship with 'a creature of equal, if of unlike frailties' ; an art that must be mastered afresh, year by year : because life, as we know it, is rooted in change ; and if a husband and wife are not imperceptibly growing towards one another,

they are almost infallibly growing in the other direction. But for the artist woman self-surrender is no natural instinct: it is a talent to be consciously acquired, if she ever acquire it at all: and although Quita had, in some sort, been through the fire, she was still a novice in those 'profound and painless lessons of love,' that can only be taught in the incomparable school of marriage.

Meanwhile, she was learning her husband,—in his own phrase,—like a new language; and enjoying the process, despite its undeniable difficulty. For the man was by temperament inarticulate, and a solitary: propensities aggravated by six years of bitterness, and stifled passion. Let his love be never so deep and true, the spell of isolation, the spirit that drives men into the wilderness, was as strong in him as the need to share thought and feeling with the heart nearest her own was in his wife. At no time could he have been classed among the frankly unthinking men who slip into marriage as composedly as they slip into a new suit of clothes: and at five-and-thirty, the complete readjustment of life and habit demanded by this exquisite yet exacting bond could not be arrived at without some degree of conscious strain and compromise.

The past few weeks had revealed to both, more or less clearly, the 'sea of contrarieties' through which they were called upon to steer without capsizing; had brought them to that critical turning-point when the first rapture of passion in possession subsides imperceptibly, into an emotion deeper and more stable; when the insignificant outer world resumes its normal proportions; and individuality reasserts itself, often with disconcerting results!

Hence Quita's revived zeal to finish a picture begun and flung aside months ago; and Eldred's unusually prompt response to a request from an Editor friend in England for a set of articles on Tibet, whose holy of holies had not then been unveiled and described for the benefit of man's insatiable curiosity.

He was in his study now, finishing the first of them in time for the homeward mail: unconsciously enjoying a return to the familiar occupation. The writing of it had engrossed more of his mind and leisure during the last

week than Quita chose to consider quite admissible in those early days. Her own absorption in her picture was quite another matter, be it understood ! And, in truth, she would gladly have had him in the studio, ensconced in his own chair, and available for argument or love-making according to her mood. Hitherto she had resisted temptations to invade his study when she knew him to be at work. But this afternoon a vague spirit of unrest had gotten hold of her, making the thought of his diligence, and complacent detachment from her, peculiarly exasperating ; and before long exasperation drove her to the door of his sanctum.

It stood ajar : and pushing it open, she went softly in. His back was toward her, and his concentration so complete that he was not aware of her till she stood at his elbow. Then he started and looked up with a smothered exclamation of doubtful character.

“ Hullo, my lady, I thought this was against regulations ! What’s up ? ”

She perched lightly on the arm of his chair.

“ Nothing’s up. I’m rather ‘down,’ that’s all ; or I wouldn’t have infringed your territorial rights ! Do leave off being a model of industry, and come into the studio.”

“ But, my dear girl, . . . why ? ”

“ Because I want you. Isn’t that reason enough ? There’ll be plenty of time to finish grinding out dry-as-dust facts about Tibet after tea.”

“ I’m afraid not. I told Desmond I’d get down to the tent-pegging early. Is it really anything important, lass ? ” he added, controlling his impatience with an effort.

“ Oh dear, no, not the least in the world ! ” She was on her feet now : head erect : dignity incarnate. “ Unless it is important to do what your wife asks you with good grace. But I believe little illusions of that kind are warranted not to outlast four months of marriage.”

He brought his hand sharply down on the table.

“ Quita, you are talking childish nonsense. Why the dickens can’t you leave me in peace till I’m through ? I shan’t be much longer now : and you can lecture me on

the whole duty of husbands all the evening, if you've a mind to."

"Indeed I've not. Duty never gets a word in edge-ways, while Love is master of the house. If it ever comes to 'duty' between you and me, I shall pack my kit and go, I promise you. It's the reality or nothing for me.—But don't hurry your work on my account, *mon ami*," she added, on her way to the door. "I shall probably drive over to Honor's, and leave you in peace till dinner-time. In fact, you have my permission to dine at mess for a change, if it would amuse you."

And as he turned quickly with remonstrance on his lips, the door closed behind her. With a sigh that ended in a smile, he took up his pen again: wishing her back the moment she was out of reach. For beneath his surface equanimity, the man in him was still thrilling under the emotion and astonishment of absolute possession; under the hallowing sense of permanence that at once calmed and exalted the fever heat of passion.

But Quita returned to her studio feeling more out of tune than ever. It was her own foolish fault, of course, for interrupting him: a form of knowledge that has never yet made for consolation. And while she stood alone before her picture, wondering whether she really would order the trap and go over to the Desmonds, footsteps in the verandah heralded Honor's appearance in the doorway:—a glowing Honor, looking remarkably young and fresh in a long, loose alpaca coat, and a shady Leghorn in which roses nodded: the peach-bloom of health back in her cheeks, the old buoyant stateliness in her step and carriage.

Quita flew to her with a little cry.

"Honor, you dear woman! How engaging of you to turn up, just when I was wanting you, and feeling too lazy to go and find you."

The kiss that passed between them was a real one: not the perfunctory peck of greeting that usurps its name. For, as flowers most exquisite spring from strangely unpromising soil, so had those two weeks of isolation and heart-hunger on the unloveliest hill-top of Northern India generated an enduring friendship between these

two women, so unlike in outward seeming: a deeper thing than the facile feminine interchange of Christian names and kisses.

"Come your ways in, you patent radiator of happiness!" And Quita would have thrust her friend into Eldred's chair: but Honor, catching sight of the picture, went eagerly up to it.

"My dear, how remarkable! When did you begin it?"

"Ages ago, in Dalhousie; and now I want to finish it. But the lamp of inspiration won't burn. I'm afraid the wick's gone mouldy from disuse."

But Honor was reading the lines above the canvas.

"Ah, I see! Christina Rossetti," she said. "Quita, you must finish this. It's going to be very good. I love that little poem."

"Yes, *you* would. I've always rebelled against it. But last year when everything seemed such a struggle, the lines haunted me so, that I tried to get rid of them by turning them into a picture; and that's the result. Rather like Eldred and me! He's always dragging me up on to higher ground: yet he's so divinely unconscious of it all the time."

"Dear fellow!" Honor said softly. "But *he* hasn't done all the lifting. You've made a new man of him, Quita."

"Have I?" Sudden seriousness shadowed her eyes. "It was the least I could do, . . . considering all things. Only . . . I wish he wasn't quite so inward; so in love with his own company."

"You'll change that, in time."

"Do you think so? I wonder."

She bent in speaking to look through three or four small canvases that stood with their faces to the wall.

"I want to show you the pair to my Up-Hill picture. It's another Rossetti, *Amor Mundi*; and the contrast pleases me. I've taken the opening lines:

"Oh where are you going, with your love-locks flowing,
On the west wind blowing, along this valley track?
The down-hill path is easy; come with me, an' it please ye;
We shall escape the up-hill, by never turning back."

So they two went together, in glowing August weather,
The honey-breathing heather lay to their left and right . . .

There now, can't you see them going down and down . . .?"

With a quick turn of the wrist she brought the picture into view, and set it on the table in a good light.

"Can't you feel the soft wind against their faces, . . . the ease, the swiftness, and the thrill of it all; the thrill of yielding to earth and the beauty of earth, of giving up for a while one's futile struggles to reach the moon?"

Honor stood silent, gazing at the picture with rapt interest. To this deep-hearted passionate woman, whose sympathies stretched upward and downward along the whole gamut of human feeling, its appeal was far stronger than Quita—in whom passion was mainly an imaginative quality—was likely to realise. For the small picture was heavy with heat and colour, and the glamour of high mid-summer; the sky's blue intensity glowing between masses of white thunderous cloud; the hillsides clothed in their August splendour of purple, and pink, and green: and down the white track that sloped to the valley a man and a woman, hand in hand, the woman leading, appeared to be coming straight out of the picture. Her flying hair, and the sweep of her draperies, showed the speed of their going; and the ecstasy of it shone in the faces of both.

"It's a powerful little poem," Quita exclaimed. "As they go on they meet with grisly portents, the track gets steeper, and they are afraid. But by that time it is 'too steep for hill-mounting, and too late for cost-counting; the down-hill path is easy, but there's no turning back.'"

Honor gave a little shiver.

"It's a wonderful bit of work," she said. "But is it always the man who leads up, and the woman who leads down, Quita?"

"No. By no manner of means! I happened to see it so in those two instances. Probably the sainted Christina saw it the other way round.—But come and sit in Eldred's chair now, and let's get back to realities."

"Realities? Why, my dear, your pictures touch the height and depth of the biggest realities. I never knew you did that sort of thing."

"I don't as a rule. But those poems possessed me."

"Well, I can only say, go on and do more."

"I will . . . if I can." And gently pushing Honor into the chair, she settled herself on the carpet, and flung an arm over her friend's knee. "It's high time I started work again. I've been idling far too long."

Honor smiled. "Don't be in a hurry to put an end to it, dear. It's one of the divinest and most profitable kinds of idling you will ever know. You are building up your future in these first months together."

Quita's sigh was a little anxious, though not sad.

"Are we? Well, I hope we've got the foundations right," she said, looking thoughtfully up into the other's face. Something in its veiled brilliance caught her attention, and bent her flexible mind in another direction. "Do you know, Honor," she went on, "you've blossomed out amazingly just lately. Your eyes are shining like two stars, as if you had some heavenly secret hidden behind them."

"It's an open secret, and a very human one!" Honor answered, smiling. "You are well on the way to discovering it for yourself."

With a low sound, Quita captured the hand lying near her own.

"Oh, you utter woman!" she murmured. "Is it still so beautiful . . . after three years?"

Honor's colour deepened. "It's more beautiful. Much more beautiful. Because now . . . there are two of them."

There was a moment of silence, while Quita fidgeted with the great square sapphire on her friend's wedding-finger.

"You'll think me dreadful," she said at last. "But I'm not quite sure that I see the logic of that. For the present, at all events, I only want Eldred, and these . . . my spirit children," she indicated her pictures with a little nervous laugh. "You must make allowances for the artist woman, Honor. She so seldom feels and does the things she ought to feel and do!"

"That's just why she is apt to be so refreshing!—But believe me, Quita, the most perfect marriage is not quite perfect till it becomes 'the trio perfect,' three persons and one love. That's not fantastic idealism but simple

fact. Besides," she hesitated and caressed a stray tendril of Quita's hair, "doesn't it seem to you a bigger thing, on the whole, to make men and women to the best of one's power, than to make books or pictures, even fine ones?"

"Yes, in some ways . . . it does. And for that very reason I doubt whether I am fitted to make them. It's a gift, an art, like everything else. Not the creating of them, of course. That's a privilege, or a fatality, as the case may be! But the moulding of them, after they are created. You can't deny that they complicate things: and even at this stage, I find marriage a far more complicated affair than I imagined it to be. Didn't you?"

Honor's smile was sufficient evidence to the contrary. But she was old-fashioned enough to have a difficulty in talking about the hidden poem of her life.

"Perhaps we were exceptions, Theo and I," she said at last. "We knew one another . . . intimately, before starting; and to live with him, and . . . in him, seemed to come as natural as breathing. But then, my dear, I'm simply a wife and a mother: not a woman of genius, like you."

"Aren't you, indeed? Don't pulverise me with sarcasms, please! In my opinion this exquisite passion of yours for being 'simply a wife and a mother' is in itself a kind of genius: perhaps the highest there is. You see and feel the essential beauty of both relations so vividly that you make one see and feel it also; just as certain other kinds of women make one half-ashamed of being a woman at all! Yours is the temperament that gives, Honor, . . . gives royally; and is always sure of return because it looks for none. While as for me, my present complications are the natural outcome,—multiplied by six years,—of my long-ago blindness and folly, that sprang from my capacity for taking, without a thought of giving in return. You see, Eldred and I have both an ample time to crystallise in different directions: and the years we let slip may be trusted to exact their debt to the uttermost farthing.—Ah, there he is!"

The words were a mere throb of the heart. She was on her feet when the man entered: and Honor, watching

her face, thought she had never seen it so nearly beautiful. She herself rose also, with a prompt excuse for departure.

"I haven't even *seen* Theo since breakfast," she said as they shook hands. "Tent-pegging days are hopeless: and I promised to go down early. Don't trouble to come out with me, please."

But Lenox insisted: and on his return found Quita back at her canvas, to all appearance working diligently at a difficult bit of detail in one corner. She greeted him with lifted brows.

"Finished your article already?"

"No."

"Then what on earth are you doing, loafing about in here? I'm busy. I want to get this bit done before I go out."

"Do you though?" but instead of retreating, he came closer, deliberately confiscated palette and brushes, and drew her into his arms.

"Shall I send Desmond a 'chit,' to say 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come'?"

"Yes,—do. He'll forgive you."

"And shall we go for a long ride across country, when I'm through with my work: and look in at the tent-pegging later?"

For answer she leaned against him with a sigh of content.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Elfin and human, airy and true;

Your flowers and thorns you bring with you."

—R. L. S.

BUT the stumbling-block reasserted itself, and prevailed.

The articles on Tibet were solid affairs, for a solid journal; twelve of them, to be paid for on acceptance; and since Lenox needed the money to clear off debts incurred when furnishing and pay for their trip to Kashmir,

he decided to get them written as soon as might be, before the stealthy increase of heat made mental effort a burden. Thus, while the Battery absorbed his mornings, Tibet made unlawful inroads upon his afternoons and evenings; and the narrow margin of leisure thus left to him did not by any means satisfy Quita's healthy appetite for companionship. More than once she attempted remonstrance, pitched in the wrong key, only to be routed by the unanswerable argument that the work must be done, and that there was no other time in which to do it. Finally, in a mood between pride and resignation, she shrugged her shoulders and turned elsewhere for companionship; for interests to fill the long hours which Eldred's devotion to work left empty on her hands.

And here, in a virtue pushed to the confines of vice, in the man's blind unintentional neglect of the woman for whom he would wring the last blood-drop out of his heart, you have the nucleus of more than half the pitiful domestic tragedies of India. It is the crucial moment, the genesis of a hundred unsuspected possibilities, this first divergence of the man and woman, along separate paths of interest. Love may be strong enough to stand the strain, but it will be love debarred from that intimate fusion of heart and brain which alone constitutes true marriage. The other kind is at best a permanent 'friendship recognised by the police':—a tacit confession of failure which this high-hearted, if contrarious couple were by no means minded to arrive at, now or ever. But there is no warning sign-post at the turn of the road; and already their feet were nearing it, without knowledge that its easy gradient slips into the Valley of Dry Bones.

Quita, however, was in a better case than many wives so circumstanced; in that her art was no mere distraction for spare hours, but a living reality; though, unhappily, a capricious one. And now when she would have returned to it in earnest after months of philandering with brush and pencil, it stood aloof, unmanageable as Eldred himself! She was too genuinely an artist to attempt the completion of an imaginative picture against the stream; and for fresh work, fresh mental stimulus was needed. This was not readily to be found in the everyday hap-

penings—the riding, tennis, and gatherings at the Club Gardens—that made up the cold-weather life at Dera Ishmael: and she had little taste for small social or domestic amenities, in themselves. The call of the wild was in her blood. One might as well hope to domesticate a sea-gull as a woman of this type. She managed her household on broad lines, ignoring minor details, and Zyarulla, to his secret relief, found himself still the lynx-eyed custodian of the Sahib's *Izzat*¹ in houses and compound, still the controller of his petty cash. Quita received his monthly account—plus a minute percentage on each item—in perfect good faith. His visions of possible dismissal evaporated. He heartily commended his master's choice of a wife; and, in moments of expansion over the evening hookah, confided to the Khansamah—a friend and ally in the matter of accounts—his conviction that Mem Sahibs who made pictures were of a different *jāt* to those who played tennis, harried their ayahs, and rode rough-shod over the sensibilities of honest bearers like himself!

And, in truth, the Bohemian and cosmopolitan elements in Quita made her airily contemptuous of trifles, of the petty point of view, the 'local' attitude of mind often found in isolated Indian stations, more especially among the women. And setting aside Honor and Frank, the half-dozen officers' wives belonging to the Infantry Regiments were for the most part colourless average types of femininity such as Quita was something too ready to despise.

But the woman element had never played a large part in her life; and it was to the men she turned instinctively for mental companionship; for the larger outlook, the saner grasp of things big and small. She drew them by a natural magnetism; and held them by a talent for comradeship which never degenerated into familiarity or freedom. The four Battery subalterns, headed by Richardson, surrendered at discretion. And there were others also; notably George Rivers, Desmond's subaltern, a promising Lothario with a profile, a tenor voice, and an unimpeachable taste in ties and waistcoats. But

¹ Prestige.

Quita gave the preference to Eldred's brother officers ; and to their open delight made them free of the house. One or more of them dined with her at least three nights a-week ; and her instantaneous gravitation to Max Richardson had already resulted in an informal friendship equally delightful for both.

Lenox accepted these developments without comment, yet not without inward regret. For he craved the restfulness of quiet evenings alone with his wife, after a hard day's work : and indeed saw more than enough of his subalterns — always excepting Dick — on the parade-ground and in the orderly room every morning. Very soon he took to excusing himself early, on these convivial evenings, with the result that before long the old habit of working at night had him in its clutches once again, the charm of it heightened by months of abstinence. For a while he held out against it ; but the quiet within and without, the certainty of freedom from interruption, the lucidity of thought that brains of a certain order seem only able to arrive at in the small hours, were powerful advocates for surrender ; and little by little habit conquered. He smoked more and slept less ; and the quality of his work improved in great strides.

But Quita objected strongly to this barefaced revival of ' bachelor habits ' within six months of marriage ; and more than once — waking in the small hours to find herself alone — she had slipped on her dressing-gown and boldly invaded his study ; a disarming vision enough, her face flushed with sleep, looking absurdly young in a halo of tumbled hair, her eyes alight with tenderness and enjoyment of her own daring. On each occasion she was reproved without severity ; established herself in the deck-lounge of old days ; fell asleep promptly, and was carried protesting back to bed ; but not until she had seen the lamp put out and the detestable litter of papers tidied up for the night.

In this fashion the first half of March slipped uneventfully by, each day bringing with it that imperceptible advance of heat which strikes an undernote of dread through the rose-scented languor of a Punjab March.

For in the vast Northern Plains of India, it is autumn, not spring, that bears the winged word of resurrection. But Quita was still at that enviable stage in love's progress when times and seasons and places shrink to mere pin-points beside the one supreme fact. A Frontier hot weather in Eldred's company held no terrors for her. Possibly two months' leave would be available later on, when they would spend the honeymoon—of which they had been twice defrauded—in Kashmir; and, in the meantime, so long as one roof covered them, all was well; in spite of her secret wish that Tibet and the Pamirs could be expunged from the map of Asia by means of a private deluge!

But if Quita were inclined to quarrel with her husband's industry, Max Richardson was not. He was enjoying, for the first time in his life, the mere pleasantness of a woman's intimate companionship;—in Quita's case a companionship full of incident, of delicate reticences, alternating with unexpected revelations of thought and feeling; and through it all a frank interest in everything that concerned himself, which is perhaps the subtlest form of coquetry. Not that Quita meant it as such. In her entire devotion to her husband, she simply did not consider her effect upon other men; to whom, in consequence, she showed her true self almost with the freedom and spontaneity of a child. Richardson's own simplicity of character, and the ease with which one slips into a pleasant path, helped matters forward; and before long, they had fallen quite naturally into the habit of riding or driving together when Lenox happened to be very much engaged. Quita saw no reason to conceal her pleasure in these outings. Lenox thanked his friend once or twice, bluntly enough, yet with evident sincerity; and Richardson accepted his own good fortune with an unquestioning appreciation very characteristic of the man.

His thoughts were running definitely upon this pleasant state of things, as he drove Quita Lenox homeward through the main street of the native city, on a glowing evening, some two weeks after Honor's visit to the studio. Behind them clattered a small guard of native police, without whom it would not be advisable to explore a

Frontier city; and on either hand stretched a narrowing vista of open shop fronts noisy with vituperative buyers and sellers; brilliant with piled vessels of brass and copper, with the rainbow tints of dyed silks and muslins, piles of parched corn and spices, oranges, bananas, and pomegranates; their upper storeys breaking out into quaintly carved windows and balconies, strange splashes of colour, or rough childish pictures, innocent of proportion. And, better than these, in Quita's esteem, was the wide street itself, packed with the noisy, leisurely life of an Indian city:—goats and cattle; women and children; open bullock-carts that seemed to have all eternity to travel in; princely-looking Afghan traders in long coats and peaked turbans; Waziris, with keen, Jewish faces framed in greasy locks that fell upon their shoulders; the *sais* from his tail-board shouting ineffectual commands to make way for the Sahib; long-legged fowls, leaping and fluttering up under the pony's nose; pariahs, lazily insolent, almost allowing the wheel to graze thigh-bone or paw, before they condescended to loaf away to a fresh resting-place; and over all an arch of blue, so deep and passionate as to be almost vocal; and pervading all, the indefinable, unforgettable smell of the East:—a smell compounded of musk, spices, open drains, and humanity.

When at last they emerged into the open, and quickened their pace, Quita drew a breath of satisfaction, and smiled up at her companion, who allowed his eyes to linger in hers a moment longer than the occasion required.

Their outing had been an unusually long one; for whenever she could find her way into the city Quita was insatiable. Again and again Richardson had sat waiting in the sun, while she made thumb-nail sketches of street corners, bargained with curio-sellers for the Alexander coins and relics which abound at Dera Ishmael, or extracted information from shy, smiling women, whose faces happened to take her fancy in passing.

“ You have been a miracle of patience! ” she assured him, as they neared cantonments. “ And I daresay you hated it half the time, and scorned my globe-trotter behaviour! I’ve noticed how quickly most Anglo-Indians

get bored if one asks questions, or shows the smallest interest in the country and the people."

"Probably they don't enjoy airing their own ignorance," he suggested, with lazy amusement in his eyes. *I'm* not bored with you, though. Shouldn't be, even if you were to pelt me with questions till midnight."

She laughed lightly.

"Don't dare me to put you to the test! It might make us enemies for life. And it's really capital that we get on so well. Just think how awkward for Eldred if I had taken one of my strong unreasoning dislikes to you!"

"Still more awkward for me! I never thought you carried hidden weapons of that sort about with you."

"Wait till you know me better. I am a hopeless creature of extremes! You can't think how I hated my dear Honor Desmond last year,—though I'd cut off a hand for her now; nor how I still hate . . . some one I have never seen;—some one who wrote to Eldred—about me—years ago."

She broke off, remembering that in his eyes she had only been married nine months; though if she had been looking at him instead of contemplating the hands that lay clasped in her lap, she must have noticed his start, the sudden tension of his face and figure. Lenox had never told her, then. He might have guessed as much. And why should she ever know, after all? His native honesty prompted him to make a clean breast of it, and ask her forgiveness. But something stronger,—a new imperative desire to stand well with her at any price,—held him silent. Presently, she glanced up at him curiously; but his straight-featured profile and steady hands upon the reins revealed nothing beyond a momentary abstraction of thought.

"I forgot, when I spoke just now," she said in a changed voice—a voice of closer intimacy—"that you don't know how long we have really been married,—do you?"

"Yes, I do know," he answered, still intent upon the pony. Every moment made him more exquisitely uncomfortable. But he could not lie to her.

"Did my husband tell you?" she flashed out almost angrily.

"No, indeed. He's not that sort. I—found out by chance."

"How strange! Another man did the same. One can never keep a secret in this world. Well—it was the letter I spoke of that did all the harm; that broke up everything between us for five years. Can you wonder that I've never forgiven the writer, and never shall? Not because he wrote unfairly of me, but because of all that Eldred suffered then, and afterwards."

"Did you never make allowance for the fact that he could not have known how things were between you,—that he meant no harm?"

"I'm afraid I made *no* allowances; though I'm quite aware that, speaking justly, one can't blame him. Probably Eldred never did. But I told you my dislikes were unreasonable; and it makes me hate him to think that he was quite happy away there in England all those five years, while Eldred was half-killing himself with work and misery."

"Yes. I understand that. But it's all over now; and the harm's repaired."

"I hope so, in a measure; though it's my belief that harm done can never really be repaired; only patched up."

"That's a very terrible doctrine, Mrs Lenox."

"I'm afraid facts go to prove the truth of it."

Although she spoke quietly, a touch of hardness had invaded her voice; and Richardson had no answer to give her. His cheerful, easy-going nature had rarely been so deeply stirred. A new and delightful experience seemed to be taking an unlooked-for turn, and his lame attempts at self-defence in the third person struck him as bordering on the grotesque. He set his teeth and flicked the pony viciously; then hauled at his mouth because he broke into a canter. Yet he was a tender-hearted man.

"Poor little beast! Don't treat him like that," she rebuked him, between jest and earnest. "What's wrong? The city seems to have disagreed with you."

Again he did not answer: and for a time they drove on

without speaking, each, if the truth be told, thinking of the other. Then she startled him with one of her direct, inconsequent questions.

“Mr Richardson, how old are you?”

He laughed.

“Just thirty. Why?”

“I was only wondering. You’re the sort of man who ought to marry. Have you never thought of it yet?”

“No. Too little money. Besides, I’m a lazy beggar, and I shirk the responsibility.”

“That means you’ve never been in love!”

“I suppose not. Nothing more serious than a passing inclination. Mere growing pains!” He smiled at the remembrance of a certain romantic episode in his early twenties. “What’s your notion? Have I been over-dosing you with my company that you are so keen to marry me off?”

“Don’t talk nonsense. I was simply thinking of you. You’ve the right stuff in you for a husband. But personally, I prefer you unattached. I should probably quarrel with your wife; and she would break up our friendship; which would be a thousand pities.”

“Mrs Lenox—d’you mean that? Do you really value it one little bit?”

His repressed eagerness puzzled her, and she lifted her eyebrows. “But yes, *mon ami!* Would I go about with you so much if I didn’t? I have failings enough, Heaven knows, but insincerity is not one of them. By the way, am I to put you on my other side to-night? Wouldn’t you prefer Mrs Norton, or Mrs Lacy Smith for a change? I couldn’t get the Desmonds; and Eldred hates my poor little party in consequence.”

“So shall I, if you banish me from your end of the table.”

“Well, that settles it. Two conspicuously large men in open mutiny would be more than the rest of us could stand!”

They swerved in between the gate-posts, and drew rein as she spoke. The sound of their wheels had brought Lenox into the verandah.

“It’s high time you were back again, you two,” he said,

with a touch of decision, as he lifted his wife from the cart. "I was wondering what had come to you. See you again at eight, Dick."

And Richardson, having quite recovered from his bad quarter of an hour, drove off humming the refrain of a song Quita had sung to him a few evenings back. After all, so long as she liked him, and valued his friendship, she was welcome to hate the supposed unknown, whose identity she must never be allowed to guess.

Meanwhile Lenox and his wife went on into the house, Quita disarming reproof by instant apology. "It was delightful; but I'm sorry we were away too long, dear."

He smiled contentedly down upon her. "Well—there are limits! Where on earth did you go?"

"All through the city again, and I unearthed endless treasures. You'd have loved it."

"Of course I should. Great fool that I was not to chuck the writing and take you myself!"

"Oh, if you only would, a little oftener!"

Something in her tone smote him; and putting both hands on her shoulders, he bent towards her, pain and passion in his eyes.

"Darling, tell me, have I been neglecting you lately?"

Her low laughter reassured him. "Neglecting me? Dear stupid! D'you suppose I'd sit down under it if you did? Now I'm going to change for dinner; and do please make yourself agreeable to Mrs Norton this evening."

For the Deputy Commissioner's wife was honouring her husband with a flying visit, before going north to spend the season in Simla.

"The devil take Mrs Norton. Odious woman!"

"No,—it's *you* that will have to take her!" she answered, laughing. "And it's not my fault that you won't have your beautiful Honor on the other side to keep the balance true."

Quita enjoyed her little dinner, and saw to it that others did likewise. She was a natural-born hostess. Talk never flagged in her neighbourhood, and her own lack of self-consciousness set the stiffest and shyest at their ease. Besides, she always enjoyed talking to

Norton, whose cynicism and critical attitude she disarmed by the simple means of ignoring them. She liked the man's plain, hard-featured face, ploughed with deep lines of thought and effort, and only redeemed from ugliness by his remarkable eyes.

"Stoking up!" he remarked grimly, sipping his soup with a keen appreciation of its quality. "Punkahs and hell-fire again in no time. One hardly has time to cool down before the winter slips away. Mrs Norton's off to Simla in ten days; and I suppose you'll be bolting also by the end of next month?"

She laughed, and shook her head. "If you're counting on getting my husband to chum with you this hot weather, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

He eyed her quizzically for a moment.

"Of course—I forgot. You're a new broom! If I meet you in March three or four years hence, I shall hear another story."

"And enjoy the triumph of your own cynicism! Very well, I accept your challenge. I shall write to you three years from now, just to tell you how the land lies."

"Do. And if you forget, I shall hear of you from some one else. We know all one another's little doings in this corner of the world. I feel curious about you, and prophesy that Simla and amateur theatricals will carry the day; though for Lenox's sake I hope all the triumph will be on your side. But it's no light matter, I can tell you, to win your spurs as a Frontier officer's wife of the right quality."

"Like Mrs Desmond, for instance?"

"Quite so. Like Mrs Desmond."

"I notice all the cynicism goes out of your voice when you speak of her. Yet you can make insulting prophecies about *me*, at my own table too! Am I so immeasurably inferior?"

"That remains to be seen! You have still to be tested in the furnace, and no imaginary furnace either. Man or woman, staying power's the great requisite for India, Mrs Lenox. To pull through for half a dozen hot weathers is all very well,—mere getting one's hand in. But by the time a man has completed his twentieth he begins to

know something about the weakness of the flesh. I seem to you, with your youth and high courage, a cynical, disagreeable fellow enough. But perhaps when you are middle-aged and disillusioned, and all the good blood in your veins has been dried up by fever, you'll forgive my straight speaking to-night; though by then I shall be a forgotten old fogey, eating my heart out in England, or I shall have dropped in harness, which would be the kinder fate of the two."

"Indeed I have forgiven you already," she answered in a softened tone; and involuntarily her eyes sought the handsome heavy-featured woman beside her husband, whose Paris dinner-dress was cut lower than need be, and whose elaborate 'fringe' rather too obviously grew off her head.

"Thank you. It's more than I deserve; and I'm sorry I must repay you by giving you your first taste of the pleasant little surprises that are a main feature of Frontier life. I have to go off across the Border early next week, to fix the position of a post we are going to build for our Mahsud levies, and to collect a fine from some rascals who have been raiding Tank."

"Where's that?"

"An unlucky village near the Gomal Pass,—the great trade route into the hills. It gets burnt to the ground periodically by the Waziris, probably much to its advantage; but one can't overlook the insult to British authority. So I'm obliged to visit them in state and talk to them like a father, after collecting their fine; and I'm afraid I must take your husband and Richardson along with me, besides a handful of cavalry and infantry by way of protection and prestige."

Quita's face fell. "For how long?" she asked, collecting her last crumbs of pastry with a peculiar deliberation.

"We might be ten days coming and going. Not more."

"And—would there be fighting?"

"Probably not. It's a peaceful deputation. But peace armed to the teeth is the only kind the Waziri understands; and he can't always control his rifle when he finds the eternally aggressive white man taking liberties with

his sacred hills! We shan't be sorry for a whiff of cool air any of us; and you won't be the only injured wife. Colonel Montague, of the Sikhs, comes with us; and I'm going to rob Mrs Desmond of her *preux chevalier* also. I only want half a squadron, but I shall make special request for Desmond. He's a capital man to have handy in case of accidents. As for Lenox, he'll be delighted, if that's any consolation to you."

"Well, naturally," she faced him now, eyes and lips under control. "Besides, ten days is nothing. One has to make a beginning; and it might have been ever so much worse."

"That's the plucky way to look at it," he said in evident approval; and Quita rather abruptly changed the subject.

The evening that followed was a remarkably cheerful affair, imbued with that spirit of friendly informality which makes the little dinners of India live long in the memory. O'Flannagan had brought his banjo. Rivers and Richardson both sang creditably; and Quita herself was in one of her 'inspired' moods. Only Mrs Norton, having deposited her grey satin magnificence upon the sofa, protested mutely against what she considered a tendency to 'rowdyism' in her hostess; flirted—intellectually—with any one who had the hardihood to sit near her; and on the stroke of ten rose with a suppressed yawn and a transparently insincere little speech about an enjoyable evening.

"Begad, but her works want oiling badly!" O'Flannagan confided to Quita, as the last shimmering morsel of her train slid out of sight. "She's one o' your immaculate Englishwomen who give me the blues. Come on, Mrs Lenox. Thank Heaven for the dash o' ould Ireland in you; and let's begin to enjoy ourselves!"

From that moment the evening took a new lease of life. Two battery subalterns came over from mess, and it was close on midnight when Lenox, returning from his final duties in the verandah, found Quita standing by the mantelpiece, her cheeks flushed, her eyes radiating enjoyment.

"Thank the Lord that's over!" he ejaculated fervently,

flinging himself into a deep arm-chair; and she turned on him promptly, with a visible ruffling of her feathers.

"Eldred, you're positively inhuman. When you talk like that you make me want to hit you!"

She stood above him, threatening him with one slim hand; but Lenox, reaching up lazily, grasped her arms below the elbow, and gently but irresistibly forced her on to her knees.

"Hit out, lass, if you've a mind to," he said good-humouredly. "I swear I won't retaliate!"

She struggled for freedom; but he held her in a vice.

"You great schoolboy,—let me go!" she commanded, between laughter and vexation. "I don't care if you *do* hate dinner parties. I must have them sometimes. I love to see people enjoying themselves as they all did tonight, except that odious Mrs Norton, who doesn't count. You're not pliable enough. That's what's the matter with you. But if I live to a hundred and twenty you'd never make a hermit out of *me*!"

"And if you gave a party every night of your life you'd never make a society man out of me. I should simply apply for a trans-frontier billet, where wives are not admitted. But look here, little woman, did Norton tell you about next week?"

"Of course he did. You'll be gone in three or four days. It's hateful. Do let me have my arms back, darling."

And he surrendered this time.

"Are you sleepy?" she asked, her eyes, full of laughter, resting in his.

"Lord, no. I'm going to sit up and put in two hours work at least before turning in."

"Indeed you'll do no such thing. You're going to sit up and talk to me. I didn't like to bother Mr Norton; but I've a hundred questions to ask you about it all."

"*Hazür ke kushi!*¹ Ask away. Only let me get at my pipe, and I'm at your service."

He filled and lighted it with leisurely satisfaction; and Quita, settling herself on the carpet beside him, her face looking into his, her bright head laid against his knee,

¹ As your Honour's pleases.

kept him talking of Border politics and Border warfare till all thought of putting in two hours' work was out of the question.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“The work is with us ; the event is with Allah.”

—KIPLING.

“ SHADE, water, grass . . . Not half a bad place for a picnic, eh, Major ? And I hope that plausible-looking scoundrel, talking to Norton, has provided a decent breakfast for us. Five hours of marching in this air puts an edge on a fellow's appetite.”

Richardson's remark was addressed to Desmond,—now a Major of six months' standing,—whose practised eye was critically surveying the camping-ground assigned by the local magnate, Nussar Ali Khan, to the seven British officers and their handful of native troops.

The site chosen was the topmost of two wide terraces descending to a stream, from whose farther bank a great hill rose abruptly, dark with pine and ilex, and cleft into a formidable nullah. On the right, flat house-tops of a walled native village overlooked the terrace, with its inviting group of trees, beneath which breakfast was in preparation. On the left another elevation, crowned with huts ; behind them an open field, sloping to a ten-foot wall ; and above the wall the ubiquitous watch-tower of the Border glowered like a frown upon the face of peace. The impedimenta of the little force,—transport, field-hospital, and camp-followers,—still trailed along a narrow lane leading from the *kotal*,¹ over which they had come, to the terrace itself. Already grey films of wood-smoke soared, plume-like, into the blue ; and the air at ten of the morning was still keen with the sharpness of a small frost at high altitudes.

“ Not half a bad place for a picnic,” Desmond admitted

¹ Hill.

mentally ; though for several reasons, this man,—who was a Frontier soldier by instinct and heritage,—would scarcely have chosen it himself.

But stringent military precautions were no part of the programme: Norton's escort of half a squadron, two guns, and five hundred Sikhs and Punjabis, being little more than a necessary appendage to a peaceful visitation. Such commonplaces of Frontier government as the enforcing of a fine, and the choosing of a site for an outpost manned by friendly tribesmen, was unlikely to cause friction or stir up strife ; and Norton, standing apart from the group of officers in khaki, was listening politely to Nussar Ali Khan and his friends,—some half a dozen Maliks from the fortified villages scattered among the hills. Spare, muscular men, all of them, in peaked caps and turbans, sheep-skin coats, and voluminous trousers, girded by the formidable Pathan belt, with its pouches, dagger, and straight-handled sword ; their bearded faces lighted up, as they talked, by flashes of white teeth ; most of them towering half a head above the squarely-built Englishman, with the jaw of a bull-dog and the eyes of a hawk ; who understood their language, their strange mingling of courage and cruelty, of simplicity and cunning, as a man only understands that to which he has devoted a lifetime of labour and thought.

Lower down, under the lee of the village wall, a local *jirgah*¹ sat watching the influx of troops with non-committal indifference, waiting to come forward and protest their devotion to the White Queen and the Burra Sahib ; their entire readiness to be bound over by the Maliks' proposals, and, in effect, to behave themselves till next time ! The utmost guarantee of good conduct that will ever be wrung out of the lawless sons of the North-western hills.

“ It is enough, Khan Sahib,” Norton said at length, cutting short a string of compliments that he knew by heart. “ Let the *jirgah* come to me and make their statement while breakfast is preparing.”

But the Khan, indicating with a sweep of his arm the limitless time at their disposal, declared that a matter so

¹ Tribal council.

trifling could very well wait till the Presence and the officer Sahibs had refreshed themselves.

"It is well known among our people, Hazúr," he concluded, "that your Honour regardeth not food or rest when work remaineth to be done. But the matter hath already been peacefully settled with these men. Moreover, there be the officer Sahibs also, desiring breakfast; and my son hath commanded everything of the best for your Honour's reception: even wood and grass in abundance, that labour might be spared."

Having struck camp before six that morning, Norton needed no further pressing: and ten minutes later the eight Englishmen were breakfasting heartily on provisions that atoned in quantity for lack of quality.

Besides Desmond and the Gunners, the Deputy Commissioner, who knew how to pick his men, had secured Unwin and Montague with the Sikhs, a smart subaltern with the Punjab Infantry, and Courtenay as medical officer. Behind them, sepoys and sowars, keeping their arms by Colonel Montague's orders, smoked or slept at their ease. Sentries had been told off; pickets posted in front and rear; the screw guns unlimbered, and stationed with their infantry escort on rising ground at the far end of the field. Scattered groups of villagers, appearing on walls and house-tops and on the hill to the left, squatted on their heels, watching the mild *tomasha* with evident interest, and exchanging broad sallies of wit with the sepoys by way of adding flavour to the entertainment.

Pipes, cigars, and a pleasant sense of wellbeing followed the meal.

"I congratulate you, Norton," Montague remarked between pulls at a stumpy briar that was consoling him for muscular fowl and curried leather. "Your Wolves of the Khánigoram are behaving like Sunday-school children at a prize giving! We can fix the site for the post when we've rested a bit longer, and start back this afternoon, eh?"

"Yes, by all means. I have only to settle matters with the *jirgah*."

"Thank goodness, I'm booked for first leave," the other continued conversationally. He was a plump, well-cared-

for little man, hampered by half a dozen boys and girls clamouring for education at home, and was beginning to lose his taste for scratch picnics across the Border. "This sort of thing sets one hankering for the hills. I suppose you won't be doing wonders up Tibet way this year, Lenox? Metal more attractive, and all that sort of thing, eh?"

"Yes, I shall stick to the Battery for the present," Lenox answered, ignoring the playful allusion: and Richardson, detecting annoyance in the tone, put in his own oar deftly enough.

"Unwin's the lucky beggar. When do you sail, old chap?"

"To-day fortnight, praise the powers! No more dancing attendance on Waziris for eighteen good months to come." He stretched his cramped legs contentedly. "Those Johnnies on the wall seem to be getting bored with our show. We ought to have brought a couple of banjos along to amuse their majesties!"

It was true. Gradually, by twos and threes, the villagers were melting away: and Desmond, who was leaning against a tree trunk close to Norton, helmet tilted over his nose, apparently half asleep, touched the civilian's arm.

"I say, Norton," he said under his breath. "Take your oath it's all square?"

Norton looked round sharply.

"My dear man, we've eaten their food. Ever know a Pathan commit a breach of hospitality?"

"No. But it looks queer."

For by now their audience had practically disappeared. The village wall was empty, save for one crouching figure, that sprang suddenly and silently to its full height, and brandished a bared sword: the blade flashing like a helio in the strong light.

"What's the *mutlub*¹ of that theatrical interlude?" Richardson demanded with a laugh; and was answered by a signal shot from the watch-tower behind.

In a flash all eight of them were on their feet: Montague and Lenox shouting to their men to 'fall in.'

¹ Meaning.

The order was obeyed with incredible promptness. But the Waziris had the advantage of playing a prepared game; and before the officers had time to disperse a murderous fire was poured upon them from all sides at once: from the village, the watch-tower, and the huts on the left. Swift as magic the walls bristled with picked marksmen, armed with matchlocks, Winchesters, and Martini Henry's stolen from Border sentries: and it was clear that the enemy held the nullah in great strength.

"Massacre, by God!" Desmond muttered between his teeth as he dodged a whizzing bullet, while a second glanced off his brass buckle, and buried itself in the tree behind him.

Colonel Montague, advancing to meet his men, who came forward at the double, fell, mortally wounded, with two bullets through his body. He staggered to his feet; only to fall again, face downward, as Desmond and Courtenay hurried up to him, and—covered by the fire of his Sikhs—carried him into comparative safety behind a stack of *bhusa*,¹ within reach of the ambulance; his bugler following close at their heels.

"I'm done for," he panted, as they laid him down. "Make the best job you can of me; and prop me . . . against the stack. I'll direct operations . . while I can . . hold out."

There was clearly nothing else to be done; and while Courtenay obeyed the dying man's injunctions, Desmond made haste to join his own sowars, who were already doing smart work with their rifles, under Ressaldar Rajinder Singh.

By now the din was terrific. It was as if a special department of hell had been suddenly opened up. Firing had become general from all the surrounding hills; for an attack of this kind, once started, speedily degenerates into a matter of *ghazâ*.² Every moment brought fresh reinforcements to the Waziris; every moment their fire grew hotter; and every moment, through the rattle of musketry and the yells of the tribesmen, came the deep-throated duet of the sturdy little screw-guns under the wall, as they pitched shell after shell into the nullah, from whose

¹ Chopped straw.

² Fanatical slaughter.

depths a hidden foe responded with pitiless accuracy and vigour.

For, simultaneously with Montague's advance, Lenox and Richardson had doubled to their guns through a hailstorm of humming, leaping bullets. One, passing through Lenox's coat-sleeve, grazed his upper arm ; while a second struck Richardson's breast-pocket, and was only prevented from wounding him mortally by a pad of first-aid bandages which Courtenay had served out to him, in joke, two days earlier. Reaching the guns unscathed, they found the gunners at their posts, the infantry escort blazing merrily and effectively at the marksmen on the wall : and at once opened fire on the nullah with case-shot and shell.

But their height and exposed position rendered them too conspicuous to be missed for long by an enemy whose skill in picking off British officers makes the little wars of the Frontier such cruelly costly affairs. In less than two minutes, a burning pain near his shoulder-blade told Lenox he was hit. But not being disabled, he paid small heed to so trivial an incident at the time. The incessant firing took up all his attention.

Before ten minutes were out, shells, case-shot, and shrapnel had all been exhausted. The Mahsuds were firing more steadily than ever ; and on the terrace itself, the infantry and sowars were in no enviable case. Unwin had fallen, shot through the head. Montague had momentarily succumbed to pain and exhaustion ; and Desmond, with little Martin of the Punjab Infantry and a Sikh Subadar, was in command of affairs.

Sudden faintness, and a damp discomfort down his back, warned Lenox that his wound must be bleeding more freely than he knew. He gripped the shoulder of a gunner standing near him ; and for an instant all things swam together before his eyes.

"Look, Captain Sahib, look ! There be fresh men on the hill."

The voice of the Havildar Major in his ear steadied his senses : and he saw the new danger that threatened. Down the steep hillside at their right rear, a compact body of men leapt cautiously from cover to cover ; an

occasional glint of sunlight on a sword-blade revealing their probable intent.

"I say, Dick, those devils 'll rush the guns if we give 'em half a chance," he said, turning to his subaltern ; and without waiting for an answer, ordered his escort to cover the hill, and prepare for a volley.

But almost before the command could be obeyed,—with a final leap and a dull roar, rising to a yell of triumph,—the Waziris were upon them at close quarters ; the front ranks brandishing long knives, the rest armed with matchlocks and rifles.

The Sikhs stood their ground sturdily : as Sikhs may be trusted to do in any straits ; while the guns, firing over their heads, sent many of the frenzied fanatics rolling over and over, with yells of a very different nature.

Then, suddenly . . . Lenox never quite knew how it happened . . . he felt the earth heave under him ; some one gripped him from behind : Dick's tall figure, revolver in hand, interposed between him and the swarming hill-side ; and the next instant reeled against him with such violence that both fell heavily to the ground. At once their men closed round them, covering them with their rifles ; a Havildar and two gunners eagerly proffering lengths of turban for bandages, since it was plain that Richardson's wound in the thigh was no light matter.

Startled and stunned as he was, Lenox righted himself speedily ; and kneeling on one knee, supported his subaltern's shoulders against the other, while a Havildar roughly bandaged the wounded leg, and bullets whinged and whirred on all sides of them.

"Dick, you'd no business to be there. What the devil did you do ?" Lenox asked, a queer vibration in his voice : for it seemed that not till this moment had he understood the strength of the link that bound him to the simple-hearted man who was his friend.

"For God's sake don't plague a chap with questions when he's hard hit. The thing's done ; and . . ." Richardson's voice trailed off inaudible,—"it's better this way . . . for her." Then he roused himself with an effort. "We've crushed the brutes, haven't we ?"

"Yes. For the present. The men behaved splendidly.

Jove! here comes Norton through the thick of it all. Orders to clear out, most likely. If it's that, I wish to hell it had come five minutes sooner." And Richardson murmured inarticulate assent.

Norton carried his message in his face.

"The Colonel has rallied a little," he said, after expressing sympathy and concern for the plight of both officers. "And he agrees with me that it is wanton sacrifice of men to hold out any longer. Only Courtenay and Martin untouched out of the seven of you; for Desmond's just had his wrist smashed, poor fellow. We must get back, as best we can, by the lane and over the *kotal*. Desmond has despatched a party of his sowars to Brownlow, of your corps, for reinforcements of men and ammunition. His post is only nine miles off, and we can push along in that direction. Now I must get back to the Colonel. I'll let Courtenay know he's wanted: and send a stretcher along."

With his departure, began the desperate business of dismembering guns and loading mules under a sharp fire: gunners, drivers, and native officers vieing with each other in carrying off the wounded, repulsing hand-to-hand attacks, and in many individual acts of gallantry. While limbering up the guns a mule was shot, and two wheels rolled down the slope. The Havildar in charge sped after them, through patterning bullets; returning with seventy-two pounds of solid metal hanging from each arm. But even as he flung them down in triumph, he rolled over, with a bullet through his chest: while Richardson's orderly staggered past, carrying the gun itself, a matter of two hundred pounds. Such amazing feats can flesh and blood achieve under the spur of momentary exaltation.

And at last,—despite the catastrophe of a stampede among the ammunition and ambulance mules, which left them poorer by four thousand rounds and their field hospital,—the preliminaries were accomplished. Covered by the sharp rifle practice of the infantry and sowars, men, animals, and stretchers retired, without precipitation or disorder, along the narrow lane, bounded by stone walls and rugged hills swarming with a jubilant enemy. For at the first signs of evacuation the Mahsuds came out in

greater numbers ; harrying and pressing in upon the dogged little column on all sides, yet rarely offering a mark for riflemen ; their lithe bodies and marvellous activity enabling them to find cover almost anywhere.

It was heart-breaking work : for, in the soldier's vocabulary, there is no more unwelcome word than retreat ; notwithstanding the fact that a retreat which covers all ranks with honour and glory is perhaps the finest achievement possible in the great game of war. Certain it is that the progress of Norton's broken escort through that veritable death-trap, to the *kotal* where a second stand might prove feasible, was carried out by officers and men with the indomitable coolness and spirit that converts failure into 'an honourable form of victory.'

It is such crises which test the mettle of our native troops : adding fresh proof, if more were needed, of the magnificent fighting material that India has given into our hands. For Colonel Montague had again lost consciousness ; and Martin having been shot in the calf as he entered the lane, the task of carrying out all the details of the retirement fell upon the senior Native officer, Subadar Hira Singh, under Desmond's orders. He and Norton, bearing the joint burden of responsibility, kept close together. The surface cynicism of the civilian had been burnt up in the fire of healthy savage action ; and at odd moments, when ordinary speech was possible, his admiration for the conduct of all concerned vented itself in disjointed ejaculations of approval that warmed the cavalryman's heart.

"Wait till I make out my report of all this," he said on one occasion. "Be sure you Piffers will get all the kudos you deserve."

And five minutes later, he fell—shot through the body—into Desmond's arms.

"Nothing . . . nothing serious," he protested, while his face wried with pain. "Don't delay matters . . . on my account. I can pull along somehow, if you'll give me an arm."

But they got him on to a stretcher, none the less ; and Courtenay did all he could till a definite halt was possible.

"Bad . . . is it ?" the civilian asked coolly, noting the

concern in the other's eyes. "Well, a man might do worse than die . . . like a soldier. But by God, I'll hang on to life somehow,—till I can draft out my report."

And hang on to life he did, in defiance of mortal pain, with a tenacity worthy of his bull-dog jaw.

At the foot of the *kotal*, Desmond called a halt; and the rearguard under Hira Singh closed up, to hold the enemy in check, that the guns and wounded might get over in safety before the position should be finally abandoned.

And now began the toughest bit of fighting the day had yet seen. For the Waziris closed with the Sikhs and Punjabis in overwhelming numbers; exchanging the clatter of musketry for the clash of steel, the sickening thud of blows given and received. But neither numbers nor cold steel availed to break up that narrow wall of devoted men. With each gap in their ranks, they merely closed in, and fought the more fiercely: Hira Singh, with his brother the Jemadar, and a score of unconsidered heroes, flinging away their lives with less of hesitation than they would have flung away a handful of current coin, to gain time for those whose safety hung upon their power of resistance.

At last,—when all had passed over the small hill behind them,—came the order to fall back: and not till that moment had any man among them yielded a foot of space to the persistent foe, who now pressed after them; and, with renewed jubilations and flutterings of green standards, occupied every available position on the surrounding hills.

For two interminable hours the dreary game went on; till six ridges, that climbed to a commanding plateau, had been held and abandoned through shortage of ammunition. But thanks to the steadiness of the rearguard, and to their leader's genius for the art of war, no further lives were lost; no further advantage gained by the Waziris; and at length, heart-weary and leg-weary, they reached the plateau itself, to find Brownlow,—with shot and shell, and two hundred Sikhs thirsting for battle,—already there before them, having covered the nine miles in one and a half hours.

Perhaps only a soldier who has drunk his cup of blood and fire to the dregs, knows the strange mingling of emotions packed into that little word 'relieved': and assuredly none but a soldier could enter into the joy with which Lenox stood swaying dizzily beside his beloved guns, while he and Brownlow pitched eight-and-twenty shells into the fortified village below: the last one, to their shameless satisfaction, lighting on the mosque itself, and lifting the Mullah, with his green flag of victory, twenty feet into the air.

It was a more or less damaged and dejected party of five which assembled in the small mess tent that night.

So much had been lost, so little gained by the day's disaster: an epitome of too many 'regrettable incidents' beyond the Border. The costliest item of Frontier defence is this unavoidable waste of the lives of picked soldiers. The Sikhs had lost heavily in Native officers and men. Colonel Montague had succumbed to his wounds during the retirement. Norton and Richardson, both too severely hurt to appear at mess, were officially in hospital,—that is to say, on stretchers in two field service tents: and three out of the five men at the mess table had brought away superfluous mementoes of Waziri marksmanship.

Lenox himself had suffered more from loss of blood than from the flesh wound in his shoulder, which was not a serious affair; and to Desmond's broken wrist had been added a disfiguring slash across his cheek. No doubt orders and commendation awaited them: but their elation at the prospect was hushed by the very present shadow of death. For the soldier, inured as he is, does not count death a little thing. He cannot, any more than the rest of us, 'go out of the warm sunshine easily.' And the thought of Montague's wife and children, of Unwin's 'No more dancing attendance on Waziris,' intruded unsought, breaking the thread of common speech.

No doubt, also, Desmond and Lenox were thinking, manlike, of their own wives; and thanking God for wounds that would only let loose the woman's divine

reserves of tenderness, her passion for 'mothering' the man she loves. Once during the evening they exchanged a glance of comprehension, — the freemasonry of those who love,—and the same question sprang simultaneously to their minds. "How about poor Norton? Would the news bring that wife of his back to Dera Ishmael in the last week of March?" And Desmond decided that if it did not, Norton must be persuaded to put up with them, and submit to Honor's ministrations, in whose power to soothe and bless he had the faith of a little child, or of a great man; for the two are so nearly allied as to be almost identical.

As for Norton himself, he was too much engrossed in the painful task of 'hanging on to life' to trouble his head about any other matter. The news of his serious hurt spread through the neighbouring villages as news only speeds in India, without help of post or wire: and when, on the following morning, a deputation of friendly Khans waited upon the Burra Sahib, to express their sorrow and shame at so flagrant a breach of the great Border law of hospitality, and to offer help with the bringing in of dead bodies, Norton insisted on receiving them, propped up on a chair: a broken, but unconquered remnant of the man whom they had feared, and loved, and obeyed, with that mixture of independence and loyal allegiance which is perhaps England's greatest triumph in India.

But all his courage could not conceal the truth from their eyes: and with one accord, these hardened men—who had no regard for death in the abstract, and an unlimited veneration for strength in any form—bowed themselves at the Englishman's feet, and wept like children.

"Oh, Sahib, . . Father of the District, . . this is an evil thing that hath befallen," the oldest among them wailed, in deep-toned lamentation. "How will it be with us who have so long been ruled by your wisdom, when the light of your Honour's countenance is withdrawn? And whom will the *Sirkar*¹ send us in thy stead?"

"In less than a month the *Sirkar* will send fire and

¹ Government.

sword," Norton answered sternly. "Smoking villages, and blackened crops. A gift for a gift, a blow for a blow, is straight dealing. But for one life taken yesterday the *Sirkar* will exact ten: of that ye may rest assured."

"Nay, but let it not be forgotten, Hazúr, that we, who are present, be men of one word, true to our salt; not as those murderers, upon whom the wrath of Allah will be poured out like water, even upon the man-child at the breast, for yesterday's black work."

Which comfortable prediction Norton received with rather a bitter smile. It did not square with his own experience of the ironical tangle men call Life. But for all that, it is possible that, in his extremity, he envied these savage Sons of the Prophet their faith in the rough justice of Allah's dispensations.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"The man was my whole world, all the same,
With his flowers and praise, and his weeds to blame;
And either, or both, to love."

—BROWNING.

THE Father of the District never saw his unruly children again; nor did Mrs Dudley Norton ever return to Dera Ishmael Khan. The telegram he despatched to her on arrival, made light of his wound, and its possible result; perhaps because pride urged him to take the initiative rather than submit to the culminating proof of her total detachment from him; perhaps because he shrewdly guessed that she could not reach him in time.

It had needed all the reserves of strength that are the reward of clean and temperate living, to keep him alive throughout the return marches. Yet the feat was accomplished, and his official report—a lucid, vigorous bit of work—drawn up in full; with the result that, in leisurely course of time—a mere trifle of seven months or so after the event—there appeared in the 'Army Gazette' the

names of Major Desmond, V.C., Captain Lenox, C.S.I., and Lieutenant Richardson, as officers on whom her Majesty had been graciously pleased to bestow the Distinguished Service Order. The principal Native officers, whose gallantry had been so notable a feature of that grim day's work, received the coveted Order of Merit; Hira Singh and his brother being gazetted, though killed, that their widows might draw a larger pension. For England is rarely unmindful of her heroes; notwithstanding her superb dilatoriness in honouring the men who risk death and disablement for the maintenance of her scattered Empire.

With the completion of the report, on which his heart was set, the will to live deserted Dudley Norton. To drop in harness was, as he had said to Quita, a kinder fate than the dismal disintegration of a loveless old age; and the loosening of his grip on life brought reaction sharp and sudden, from which he never rallied again.

His death, following close upon that of the two Sikh officers, cast a temporary gloom over the station; and on the occasion of its announcement, the two chief papers of Upper India broke out into journalistic eulogies on the notable qualities of the man's work and character; extolling his strength and breadth of purpose and of view; his daring disregard for red-tape and all the paraphernalia of mechanical officialdom; and above all, his remarkable hold upon the Frontier tribes; administering, too late—with true human perversity—the praise that had been so grudgingly dealt out to him when ambition was at its height, when a word or two of generous recognition would have atoned in some measure for the failure and embitterment of his private life. Finally, they commiserated with the man on whom would devolve the insuperable task of replacing a Dudley Norton.

He arrived in due course:—a stop-gap from an obscure down-country station; a man of hide-bound conventionalism, who brought with him three children and a washed-out, subdued-looking wife, and who spoke magnanimously of Norton as “a clever fellow, of course, but deplorably casual officially.” With such haphazard shifting of pawns on the chess-board is the momentous game of Empire

played. Yet long after Dudley Norton's name had been almost forgotten by the overtired, fluctuating world of Anglo-India, it still remained a household word among the Mahsud Waziris, whose brothers in blood had so treacherously taken his life.

And while Norton lay dying at the Desmonds' bungalow, Richardson was established under his friend's roof as a matter of course. For this is India: the land of the Good Samaritan, as those who have lived there longest know best. It has been well said that "an Englishman's house in India is not his castle, but a thousand better things—a casual ward, a convalescent home, a rest-house for the strayed traveller; and he himself is the steward of it merely." That this is no exaggeration but simple fact, Quita had already seen; and now, when she herself was called upon to obey the unwritten law of her husband's country and service, Lenox noted, with a throb of pride, that for all her artist's tendency to shrink from pain and suffering, she rose to the situation like a high-mettled horse to a fence.

On their first evening together, when Dick, under the merciful influence of morphia, had forgotten pain in sleep, Lenox spoke to her of the thought that troubled his mind.

He was lying back luxuriously in his deep chair—the wounded shoulder and left arm scientifically bandaged—while Quita hovered about him, or knelt at his side; her every tone and gesture, and the misty shining of her eyes, enveloping him in so exquisite an atmosphere of tenderness that, like Stevenson, Lenox felt inclined to vote for separations (not to say wounds) when they were both safely over!

"Come here a minute, darling," he said at length, drawing her down beside him. "I want to tell you about Dick. There's no getting at the rights of it, of course. He won't say a word himself; and I went all to pieces for the moment. I only know that when the firing was hottest, he managed to cross in front of me; that the bullet in his leg ought by rights to have gone into mine; and it's quite bad enough to know that."

Quita's eyes swam in sudden tears. "I always thought

him a dear fellow," she said softly. "Just a dear fellow; not much more. But now—one begins to admire your 'Dick.'"

Lenox nodded. "You never quite know what stuff a fellow's made of till he gets his chance."

But Quita, crouching lower, had bowed her forehead upon his hand.

"What is it, lass?" he asked; and when she looked up, not only her lashes, but her cheeks were wet.

"Eldred, am I hideously wicked?" she faltered. "I was—I was thanking God that he *did* take his chance. Think—if it *had* been you! *Am I wicked?*"

He drew her close, and kissed her. "Hardly that, dearest. Only very human."

"But there's no danger, is there? No permanent damage done?"

"No. Mercifully the bullet only grazed the bone. He may have a week of fever, and a slow convalescence; but you'll not grudge the trouble of nursing him, after what I've told you."

"I'd never have done that. And now,"—she rose to her feet, her eyes kindling,—"now it will be a privilege. Oh, I'll be ever so good to him," she added under her breath.

And for the next three weeks—being, as she had said, a creature of extremes—she was so uniformly and enchantingly 'good to him' that those long days of fever, pain, and enforced idleness were among the most delectable Max Richardson had ever known, or ever wished to know; that, in truth, each landmark on the road back to health and duty could no longer be regarded with that unmixed satisfaction common to the masculine invalid.

But Richardson was too little capable of analysis to be troubled by this wrong-headed state of things, or to detect the hidden seed from which his flower of contentment sprang. Mrs Lenox was astonishingly kind to him, and quite the most charming companion a sick man could desire: that was all.

His sharp bout of fever once over, she sang to him, read to him, argued with him on a quaint variety of sub-

jects, enlarging his mental horizon, drawing out thoughts and opinions at whose existence he had never guessed till now. But for him the hidden charm of their intercourse lay less in what she said or sang, than in the vibrations of her voice ; in the quick response of lips and eyes to her April changes of mood ; and more than all in her unfailing spirit of humour, which broke up the monotone of days spent in a long chair as a prism breaks white light into a band of brilliant colours. For Quita's genius was not of the highly specialised order. It did not inhabit an air-tight compartment of her brain where pictures grew. It pervaded her whole personality. It was not merely a genius for art, but for living, for being vital, for seeing and feeling and doing all that it is possible to see and feel and do in the sum of man's threescore years and ten. Small wonder then if Max Richardson enjoyed his convalescence, and was in no hurry to complete the process.

As for Quita, she was unconsciously slipping back to her favourite pastime, to that alluring compound of friendship and etherealised flirtation which she had likened to fencing with the buttons off the foils. The outcome of her last fencing-bout might have awakened glimmerings of caution in a less reckless offender. But Richardson was not to be named in the same day with James Garth ; and in his case it was less a matter of fencing than of 'two heads bending over the same board till they touch, and the thrill passes between them' ; a dangerous variation of the same amusement. The two heads had not touched as yet. In all probability they never would. But prophecy is unsafe where the human heart is in question: and as the months slipped by, and Eldred's reabsorption in the Battery and the hated articles left them constantly alone together, Quita grew genuinely fond of this big, fair man, with his unruffled sweetness of temper, and lazily smiling eyes. He satisfied the lighter elements in her nature as completely as her husband satisfied its deeper needs ; and in truth, so little did one man's sphere of influence trench upon the other's, that she had almost been capable of loving both at once; each with a different set of faculties:—an

achievement only possible to that bewildering creation, the artist woman!

Not that Quita had yet achieved anything so remarkable. But her feeling for Richardson, founded upon gratitude and built up by sympathy, was a real thing; and being singularly free from the taint of baser clay, she frankly acknowledged the fact, not only to herself but, on more than one occasion, to her husband, thinking to please him by her appreciation of his friend.

But man is born to perversity as the sparks fly upward; which is more than half the reason why he is born to trouble. Also, perversity apart, it was early days for a husband, endowed with the normal man's desire for exclusive possession, to stand the strain of a triangular household. Therefore, when Quita, extolling Richardson's patience and gratitude, remarked for the second time with unguarded fervour, "One really grows much too fond of the dear fellow," Lenox turned upon her a straight glance of scrutiny.

"Great luck for him. Have you ever told him so, I wonder?"

The undernote of sarcasm in his half-bantering tone brought the blood to her cheeks. But her manner froze in proportion to her inward heat.

"Am I given to making promiscuous declarations of that sort?"

"Not that I am aware of. But you have rather original ideas on the platonic question; and one can never quite tell where you draw the line."

"I draw it at telling a man I am fond of him," she answered, with a slight lift of her head. "Even a man so little likely to misunderstand one as your Dick."

"Is *that* what you call him now?"

"I won't answer such a question. You may think what you please."

Then, in defiance of dignity and pride, her lip quivered, and she came closer to him.

"Eldred, what makes you say such detestable things? I thought you wanted me to be good to him. Are you—angry with me about it now?"

The touch of hesitancy, so rare in her, disarmed the

man, reawakened his better self; and slipping an arm round her, he crushed her against him with a force that took away her breath.

"I'm a selfish brute, Quita. That's all about it," he said bluntly. "And Dick's the best chap in the world."

She hid her eyes a moment against his coat. Then straightened herself, and stood away from him. "You exaggerate the selfishness, I assure you," she said, smiling at his gravity of aspect. "And even if you didn't, I could forgive that; but not that you should so misunderstand my whole nature. Honestly, Eldred, I would almost rather you struck me."

"Struck you? Great Scott!"

The amazement in his eyes brought a sparkle into her own.

"Yes, exactly. That's so like a man! D'you fancy I don't know that if you laid your littlest finger on me roughly, in a moment of heat, you'd never forgive yourself? Yet you struck something much more sensitive than my mere body, when you said you couldn't tell where I drew the line. I may not have been reared upon copy-book maxims, but I have my own ideas about the fitness of things; even if they don't coincide with yours, at least I think I may be trusted not to disgrace you."

"Do you really need to tell me that, Quita?"

"It seems so—after what you said just now."

He frowned. "You can wipe out what I said just now, lass. It was spoken in annoyance."

"Well, please don't say such things again, even in annoyance; or there will never be any peace between us. Besides, my dear, they are quite, quite unworthy of you, and no one knows that better than yourself."

She came closer now, and laying both hands upon him, lifted her face to his. Then she left the study, with the seal of reconciliation upon her lips, and revived assurance in her heart.

But Lenox, drawing out pipe and tobacco-pouch, as he watched her go, was uncomfortably aware that his first attempt at remonstrance had ended in strategic surrender. Not only had he failed to dispel the nameless cloud that hung upon him, but he had managed matters so ill that

now the whole subject must be labelled 'dangerous'; not to be reopened except under special stress of circumstance.

"She needs riding on the snaffle," was his masculine reflection, arising from the natural conviction that in all matters of moment the mastery must rest with him; which was not Quita's view by any means; and her husband was just beginning to recognise the fact. He noted, in spite of her genuine devotion, a curious detachment, mental and moral, a certain airy evasion of common, womanly responsibility, the free attitude of the good comrade rather than the wife; inherent tendencies, fostered and established by the dead years that took their toll at every turn.

Each week of living with her deepened his conviction that the winning of the entire woman would be a matter of time and trouble; of acquiring knowledge in which he was still sadly deficient. And how infinitely she was worth it all! He reminded himself that the first year of marriage was proverbially difficult; that two pronounced individualities could not be expected to fuse without a certain degree of turmoil; and having lighted his pipe, he flung himself into a chair, and closed his eyes.

For his trouble of mind had a physical basis of which his wife knew nothing. His wound, though only keeping him on the sick-list a week, had given him a good deal of pain, intermittent fever, and broken nights, which he had made light of that Quita might feel free to devote herself to Richardson, whose first bout of fever had been severe. But when pain and heated blood had subsided, the broken nights remained. A crushed habit—let it be never so sternly trodden under—retains its vitality for an amazing length of time. Lenox fought the threatened return of insomnia with every legitimate weapon; spent the greater part of each night in his study, writing doggedly, or pacing the long room with mechanical persistence,—to no purpose.

Then, with a stunned incredulity, he realised what was happening. Stealthily, insistently, the old craving was reasserting its dominion over him. He had been prepared for the possibility of its recrudescence once or twice in the event of illness or mental strain, before he could count

it conquered for good. But that it should have come so soon, and upon so slight a provocation, knocked all the heart out of him; blackened for the time being his whole outlook on life. In ordinary circumstances, he would have found it an unspeakable relief to share the trouble with his wife; to give her the chance she had once so desired of helping him to fight against it. But now they were rarely alone together for long; and her lightly detached attitude tended to establish rather than dispel his native instinct of reserve. Moreover, she was so happily absorbed in ministering to his friend, that he shrank from shadowing her bright nature with the cloud that darkened his own:—a mistake arising from his rudimentary knowledge of women. For an appeal to her deeper sympathies might have wakened her undeveloped mother instinct; and by drawing them into closer union might have averted much. But in the last event, it is ‘character that makes circumstance; and character is inexorable.’

Thus Lenox, lying back in his chair, was still far from recognising his fundamental error. He was simply pondering Quita’s last words to him, and endorsing their truth with characteristic honesty. He had put himself in the wrong by his manner of broaching the subject; but the belief in his right to speak of it remained. He was prepared to put up with a good deal for Dick, but not for others; and it was beginning to dawn upon him that Dick was in all likelihood the first of a series; that only so could her need for varied companionship be satisfied. An idea that suggested disturbing contingencies. His mind reverted to Garth, to Sir Roger Bennet, and to the nameless unknowns who had probably bridged the space between. Since her frank confession of loyalty at Kajiar, he had refrained from expressing curiosity on the subject. But a man cannot always keep his mind from straying into forbidden places. “If only she would not treat the whole crew as if they were her brothers; and favourite brothers at that!” had been his thought more than once during the past few months. It was all very well with Dick,—a gentleman through and through, without a grain of conceit in him; but there were scores of others who

would not understand. Garth, for instance, had clearly not understood ; and for her sake, as well as his own, Lenox did not choose that she should multiply mistakes of that kind.

With a sigh, he drew out his watch, remembering that he had consented to be one of the judges at the Punjab Infantry sports, in which some of his own men and Native officers were taking part. Perhaps Quita would drive down with him : but he would not press the point.

Her infectious laughter seemed to challenge and rebuke his black mood, as he opened the drawing-room door to find her taking her patient for a walking tour, his hand resting on her shoulder ; her face alight with encouragement, looking up into his. For it was this big man, with his dependence, and his simplicity of character, who had wakened the mother spirit in Quita after all ; though she was not yet alive to the fact.

They stood still when Lenox appeared, Richardson a little breathless from some recent effort.

“ He tripped over your bear’s head, and I saved him from falling ! ” Quita explained triumphantly. “ I wanted him to try without the crutch, because Dr Courtenay takes him in to dinner to-night ; and he hardly had to lean on me at all ! ”

“ I told Mrs Lenox you’d be down on me if I turned her into a walking - stick,” Richardson added in half-laughing apology. “ But she insisted. And you know how much chance a fellow has when she insists ! ”

“ Yes—*I* know,” Lenox answered, such depth of conviction in his tone that Quita laughed again.

“ *Mon Dieu*—listen to the man ! One would think I spent half my time insisting on his doing what he hates ; which is a rank libel ! Now, Mr Richardson, back to your chair, please. You’ve done enough for one while.”

Lenox put out a hand to steady him across the room.

“ He’s going to beat me at picquet now, by way of gratitude,” Quita remarked, shaking out his pillows and settling him in. “ *Are you off anywhere, mon cher ?* ”

“ Yes : to the P. I. sports. I’m one of the judges.”

“ Then it would be quite useless to go with you. But I’ll ride down, if you like.”

Lenox hesitated. He had seen the shadow of disappointment in his subaltern's eyes.

"N . . no," he said at length. "Better stop and play with Dick. When I come back I'll get you up into the trap, old man, and take you for a drive before dinner. Who's coming, Quita? Just the Desmonds and Courtney?"

"Yes; and the Ollivers."

"I'm glad. She's good company."

"Which is more than I can say of *him*," Quita remarked, as the door closed behind her husband. "And he takes me in. Poor me! But you'll be on the other side; and you must be very kind to me to make up."

He smiled gravely upon her, without replying. She had established herself on a low stool fronting him; elbows on knees, hands framing her face, her fearless eyes searching his own.

"What are you smiling at?" she asked.

"The notion of a great buffer like me being 'kind' to *you*. It's you and Lenox who are a long sight too kind to me. You're spoiling me between you. Why didn't you go to the sports with him just now?"

"Because I didn't choose!" she answered sweetly. "And as for spoiling,—what else did we have you here for? The only thing I ask in return is that you will give up this nonsense about not letting me paint your portrait. Will you, please?"

He was silent a moment, tugging at his fair moustache, his eyes avoiding hers. Then:

"It wouldn't be worth all the work you'd put into it," he objected with an uneasy laugh.

"I'm the best judge of that. Inspiration's been dead in me for months; and now that you have set the spark ablaze, it's hardly fair or gracious to fling cold water on the poor thing. But of course if the sittings would bore you, now you can move about a bit——"

"Bore me? Mrs Lenox!" He looked straight at her now, emphatic denial in his gaze; and she nodded contentedly, knowing that her point was gained.

"That's a mercy," she said. "Put on your service kit to-morrow morning, and we'll start in earnest. I'm long-

ing to begin. But in the meantime you are generously permitted to beat me at picquet!"

The dinner that evening was, as Quita explained, "Just a family affair," to celebrate Richardson's good progress, and drink success to the punitive expedition, which on that very day was filing through the Gomal Pass into Mahsud territory, to take toll, not only in men's lives, but 'in steer and gear and stack' for that day of treachery and black disaster, whose hidden motive still remained a mystery even to those most intimate with the tribes of the district.

Honor, who had not seen Lenox for nearly a week, was struck by a change in him, whose significance she understood too well. The lurking shadow in his eyes, the bitterness in his tone,—recalling 'bad days' last hot weather,—so troubled her that she found surface talk and laughter an effort, and felt grateful to Frank, who could always be counted upon for more than her share of both.

She rallied him on his gravity, in happy ignorance of the cause.

"Sure ye're just in low water, Captain Lenox," she declared with her big laugh, "because your dapper little screw guns have been left out of the show. You want to be hitting the scoundrels back with your own shells, eh?"

To which Lenox replied in an undertone of savage conviction that puzzled Honor.

"You never made a straighter shot, Mrs Olliver. I'd give five years of my life to be taking the Battery through the Gomal to-day."

But if Lenox had little to say for himself, Quita was not in the same dilemma. In fact, it seemed to Desmond that she talked a little too daringly, a little too much; and for the first time he found his appreciation tinged with criticism.

He had gathered from Lenox that she knew little or nothing of his hidden trouble; but it struck him that a wife of the right sort (Honor, for instance) would have guessed the truth by now. He knew how little Lenox appreciated the constant influx of men to tea and dinner; and one or two people—of the social vulture species—had

already spoken to him of her friendship with Richardson in the tone of voice which made Desmond clench and pocket his fists, lest he should knock them down out of hand. He took advantage of his seat next the Gunner to mention, under cover of general conversation, his anxiety about Lenox's health; and managed also to take part in most of his talk with Quita throughout the meal.

She redoubled her friendliness to Richardson by way of flinging down her gage; whereupon Desmond with admirable *insouciance* retired from the lists. Once or twice her eyes challenged his, half-puzzled, half-defiant. Her quick perception detected his critical attitude, and in her present mood the undernote of antagonism acted as a spur rather than a check upon the dare-devil strain in her, which was responsible for her odd mingling of folly and heroic self-devotion.

Before the ladies left the table, the success and thoroughness of the expedition was proposed with cheers; followed by a second toast, drunk in silence, to the memory of the three men who had been alive in their midst less than a month ago: and later in the evening—when the Ollivers, Richardson, and Courtenay were absorbed in whist, and Honor had gone out with Lenox into the garden, where a late moon was rising—Desmond lured Quita to the piano at the far end of the room by asking her to sing.

At the close of the second song, he leaned his elbow on the top of the instrument, and stood so, searching her face with such discomposing directness that a burning wave of colour submerged her, and she dropped her eyes.

"I don't believe you ever criticised me till to-night, Major Desmond," she murmured, striking soft chords at random with her left hand.

"Not since I really came to know you," he answered in the same tone. "You have never given me cause."

"Well—I don't like it."

"Few of us do. You prefer indiscriminate admiration?"

The flush deepened, but she looked up.

"I prefer *your* approval to *your* disapproval," she said, still moving her hand over the notes. "But I have always gone my own way; and I warn you that nothing rouses the devil in me like being scolded or dictated to."

"My dear Quita, I have no right nor wish to do either. I only want to ask you a question or two—if I may?"

"What about?"

"Your husband. He won't consult Courtenay; and I am getting anxious. Would you mind telling me about how much sleep he has had this last week?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"As far as I know he hardly ever comes to bed at all."

"Quita, you are exaggerating!"

"I only mean, it's no use asking me for accurate information."

"But do you know that insomnia's a serious thing—especially for him?"

"Yes. I made a fuss when he first began working late. It's bad for him and a nuisance for me. But I have given that up now. He's as obstinate as I am about going his own way. It's almost the only quality we share in common."

"Don't you feel it might be worth trying again?"

"Possibly. If *you* think I ought."

Desmond's eyes twinkled at the implied compliment.

"I do think it."

She sighed.

"Oh, well,—I don't promise, and we've had enough of the dismal subject for now. One never seems allowed to enjoy one's self in peace. D'you want more music, or—would you prefer whist?"

"I'm to cut in, and leave Richardson free. Is that it?"

The blush that still burned in her cheeks spread slowly over her neck to the soft lace at her breast; and the man felt that in his momentary vexation he had struck too hard. Then her eyes flashed fire into his.

"Major Desmond, if you begin saying things like that to me—I shall *hate* you."

"No, Quita. It'll never be that between us. I apologise. But you know I care immensely for your husband; and it angers me to see you—apparently indifferent . . ."

"Indifferent? How *dare* you . . .?" she breathed low and passionately, her breath coming in small gasps.

"I understand. But I'm not sorry I roused you.—Here

comes Honor. I know she wants to get home early. Good-night to you. Am I forgiven?"

"No. But you will be—to-morrow morning. I believe one could forgive you almost anything."

"I'll not be base enough to take advantage of such a generous admission," he answered, smiling and grasping her hand.

Lenox, with a keen glance at his wife's face, followed the Desmonds into the verandah, and helped Honor into her seat.

"You'll keep your promise, won't you?" she pleaded. "And go straight to bed without even looking into your study. Never mind if the lamp burns there all night. You can charge me for the kerosene!"

"That's a bargain then," he answered, laughing. "It's like old times to have *you* laying commands on me again!"

"Not only to-night, remember: a whole week of nights and more."

"Trust me. I have promised. Good-night, Mrs Desmond, and thank you."

As the dog-cart turned into the open road, Honor spoke: "Theo, if she lets him go to pieces again . . . I shall never, never forgive her."

There was a break in her low voice, and Desmond slipping a hand through her arm, pressed it close against him.

"You dear blessed woman, no fear of that. She cares,—with all her heart. But there are faults and difficulties on both sides; and I'm afraid they have still a lot of rough ground to get over before they settle into their stride."

And Quita, the perverse, Quita, the inconsistent, cried herself to sleep that night upon her husband's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXX.

“Hearts are like horses ; they come and go without whip or spur.”
—*Native Proverb.*

“ONLY ten minutes more ; a bare ten minutes. Then you shall ‘ease off’ and stretch your legs a little. I’m sure by this time you must be wishing all artists at the bottom of the sea !”

“N-no ; I haven’t got quite as far as that yet,” Richardson answered with lazy good-humour, flicking the ash off his cigar.

“You will, though, before I’ve done with you ! I know I have been exacting to-day, for the eyes are the crux of a portrait. Unless the individual soul looks out of them, it’s a dead thing. D’you know, I once told Eldred that yours were like bits of sea water with sunbeams caught in them ; and the effect isn’t easy to produce on canvas. But I’m succeeding—I’m succeeding *à merveille*. That’s why I must get the effect while my hand is in ; and you’ve not once hampered me by looking bored or impatient. How is one to reward you for such angelic behaviour ?”

“There are ways and ways. Am I allowed to choose ?”

“Perhaps,—within limits ! But we’ll discuss that when I can give my mind to the subject. Now, your head a little more to the right, please. That’s better. You get out of position when you talk.”

“Sorry. I may lean back though, mayn’t I ?”

“Why, of course ! I only wonder you don’t get up and throw the chair at my head !”

He laughed and leaned back accordingly, blowing an endless chain of smoke-rings, and watching her face, her supple slenderness, the deft movements of her hand, with a contentment whose vital ingredients he either could not or would not recognise—yet.

For a full week he had spent many hours of each day in smoking and watching her thus ; and the fact that he had never yet found the occupation monotonous was a danger-signal in itself. But your comfort-loving man is

singularly obtuse in the matter of danger-signals: and loyalty apart, Richardson was too genuinely devoted to his friend to admit the possibility of that which was almost an accomplished fact. The man was not built for high tragedy; and, in truth, the sittings were an equal pleasure to him when Lenox joined them, as he often did; the two men smoking and talking horses or their beloved 'shop,' while Quita worked and listened, and interrupted without scruple whenever the spirit moved her.

Yet beneath the smooth-seeming surface of things Lenox was more than ever aware of her curious detachment, of a disturbing sense that his hold over her was still an imperfect thing. Nor was he altogether mistaken. Quita had not yet learned to give herself royally. The fact that she had put her heart and life into the hands of the man she loved did not prevent her from going her own way; from feeling—as she had always felt—responsible to herself alone for her words and actions.

And the past week had seemed to emphasise these idiosyncrasies; because, at the first mysterious breath of inspiration, the submerged artist in her had risen again with power, had, for the time being, dominated her,—body and soul: and she may surely be forgiven if the 'world-lifting joy' of creation swept her off her feet; if she had eyes and thoughts for little else save the picture coming to life under her hand. Perhaps it needs an artist, one who has felt the Divine breath stir a spark into a flame, rightly to understand and make allowance for such spiritual intoxication. Michael,—shallow-hearted egoist though he might be,—would have understood: because he was an artist. But Lenox, being simply a man and a soldier, found it difficult to distinguish between her absorption in the picture and in the subject of the picture; difficult to realise her momentary freedom from the personal equation.

What with incessant sittings, and equally incessant people to tea and dinner, he had little intimate speech of her in the daytime; and in the long hours of wakefulness as he lay beside her listening to her even breathing, he faced the fact that his growing irritability was due to jealousy;—not the jealousy that doubts or suspects,—of

that he was incapable ; but the primitive man's demand for exclusive possession of his own. Probably Desmond, in such a case, would have lost his temper and cleared the air in half an hour. But temperament is destiny : and Lenox was not so made. He merely shut the door upon the evil thing ; and tried—not very successfully—to ignore its existence. And with three evil spirits in possession of him, it is not surprising if at times he gave place to the devil.

Of all this Quita was airily unaware. Since he had given up coming to bed at unearthly hours, she concluded that he slept. Mixed motives had held him silent in regard to the threatening shadow of opium, even during her moment of collapse and self-reproach after the expedition dinner ; and of his dawning jealousy he was at once too ashamed and too proud to speak.

This morning his repressed irritability had been more marked than usual ; and Quita had decided that once free from her entralling picture, she must devote herself definitely to 'cheering him up.' But for the present she discouraged troublesome thoughts ; and now, while Richardson sat smoking and watching her, she was conscious of nothing on earth save the exhilaration of success.

She let fall both hands at last, with a sigh of supreme satisfaction.

"There ! I can do no more to it—for the present. You are released. You may come and look."

He obeyed ; and stood beside her lost in uncomprehending admiration of her skill.

It was Quita who spoke first. "We have achieved a rather remarkable bit of work between us, you and I."

"We ?" he echoed in amaze. "I don't quite see where I come in."

"No : you wouldn't : and I'm afraid I can't enlighten you. But the fact remains. Would you mind if I sent it to the Academy, just as a *Portrait of a Soldier* ?"

"The Academy ? Good Lord ! I should be proud."

"Thank you. I believe they'll hang it ; and hang it well. That will be *my* reward. But what about yours ?"

She looked up at him now, letting her eyes rest confidently in his : and the glad light in them held him,

dazzled him, so that he forgot to answer her; forgot much that he ought to have remembered, in the flashlight of a revelation so simple yet so astounding that it took him several seconds to understand what had befallen him.

"Well?" she asked, smiling. "Is it so tremendous?" And the spell was broken. But reality remained.

He felt something in him throb strangely; the pain of it melting into a glow more startling than the first shock: and with an awkward laugh he turned abruptly away from her;—too abruptly, as a twinge in his left leg gave warning, so that the laugh ended in an involuntary sound of pain.

"Mr Richardson, do be careful," she reproved him gently. "What has come to you? And why do you go off like that without answering my question?"

For he had crossed to the mantelpiece; and a photo of her portrait of Lenox seemed to be absorbing his attention. Nor did he take his eyes from it in speaking.

"Because—well, because it struck me that perhaps you wouldn't be so keen about rewarding me,—if you knew"

"What? *Is* there anything to know?"

"Yes: worse luck. I ought to have spoken sooner. But I shirked it, especially after what you said out driving. You remember—that letter—long ago?"

"Am I likely to forget? What about it?"

This time he faced her deliberately, though the blood mounted to his forehead.

"I am the chap who wrote it. I'm the man you have been hating all these years; the man you *hate still*."

She came a step closer and stood gazing at him blankly, reorganising her sensations.

"You wrote it? *You?*"

"Yes; I."

"But did you really know anything about me, or about Sir Roger Bennet?"

"Nothing on earth. I was simply repeating idle gossip."

"Oh, how could you! And look what came of it. The years of bitterness and estrangement—!" He winced under her passionate reproach.

"It was done in ignorance, remember; though, as you reminded me not long since, that doesn't soften facts. Slang me; hate me for it, if you must. It can't be helped."

"But I don't hate you, *mon ami*; I couldn't if I tried for a month."

This was disconcerting. He had thought to snap the cord of their friendship, and so make it easier to see less of her in future.

"Not even now you know?" he persisted desperately. And she shook her head.

"Yet you told me distinctly that you could never forgive that unlucky chap."

"But then I never guessed it was *you*," she retorted with true woman's logic. "How could one hate you, after what happened last month. Eldred told me."

"That,"—he shrugged his shoulders,—"that was a mere nothing."

"Excuse me, as men go now it was a good deal. But still—I am puzzled. If you shirked telling me all this while, what made you tell me to-day?"

This also was disconcerting. But he did his best.

"I don't know. Perhaps it was talking of rewards. Besides—I'm one of those clumsy fools who never feel quite comfortable until he has blurted out the truth."

He tried to laugh, but her direct look broke the sound in his throat.

"I rather admire that kind of fool," she said, with quiet emphasis. "And you have lost nothing by your folly,—nothing."

"Does that mean you have quite forgiven me?" For the life of him he could not stifle the exultation in his tone.

"Quite—quite. Will that do for your reward? Shake hands on it,—please: and I promise never to speak or think of it again."

Before their hands fell apart Lenox entered, and a slight shadow crossed his face.

"A note for you, Dick," he said quietly. "The man wants an answer."

Richardson's relief was evident.

"Thanks. I won't keep him waiting." And he departed without opening the envelope.

"Don't be too long; and don't change your coat," Quita called after him. "There's some detail work that I might get in before tea." Then conscious of gathering storm, she turned hurriedly to her husband.

"What were you and Dick shaking hands about at this time of day?" he asked as the door closed upon his subaltern.

She had meant to tell him as a matter of course. But something in his tone roused her fatal spirit of perversity—and up went her chin into the air.

"We were striking a bargain. Have you any objection?"

"No. Not the smallest. Would it be any use if I had?"

She paused, weighing the question.

"I don't think it would. Petty tyranny of that kind is the last thing I could put up with; the last thing one would expect from you."

"Quite so. At the same time—marriage means compromise. You understand?"

"When a man says that he usually implies that the woman will do most of the compromising, in order that he may have his own way."

"Within limits, a man has a certain right to his own way in his own house."

"And generally gets it!" she answered lightly.

Lenox shrugged his shoulders, and going over to the easel, contemplated in silence the living likeness of his friend: while Quita, watching him, was increasingly aware of slumbering electricity that might at any moment break into a lightning-flash of speech.

"It's good. Don't you think so?" she asked on a tentative note of conciliation.

"Of course it is. Damned good," he answered gruffly.

"Eldred! Even if you *are* in a bad mood, you might control your language."

"I beg your pardon. It's exceedingly good. But you've had it long enough on hand. Shall you finish it to-day?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Because, though Dick isn't quite up to duty yet, he's fit to be back at mess again and in his own bungalow."

"Has he said anything about it?"

"No."

"And do you propose to tell him outright that he has been here long enough?"

"What I propose to say to him is my own affair. You needn't distress yourself on his account. Dick and I understand one another perfectly."

"No doubt you do. But after all, I am his hostess, and though you may not object to being flagrantly inhospitable, *I* do—very strongly. Besides, why should you be in such a hurry to turn him out? Are you annoyed again because we happen to be good friends and enjoy one another's society? I thought you were above that sort of thing."

The suggestion of scorn in her tone pricked him past endurance. He turned upon her sharply; and his eyes took on their blue of steel.

"I am not above the natural passions of the natural man. You may as well know it first as last. And I do not choose that Dick and half the men of the station shall practically live in my house because I happen to possess a very attractive wife."

"In fact, you imply that the attractive wife is bound over not to go beyond correct platitudes with any of them but you. Is that it?" she demanded, the red of rebellion staining her cheeks.

The man was sore rather than angry; and the least touch of tenderness or hesitancy would have melted him to generous contrition. But her manner hardened him, and he set his teeth.

"I imply nothing of the sort; and you know it. It would never occur to me to set limits, general or particular, on your conduct with other men; and as for your intimacy with Dick, if I didn't believe in you both absolutely I wouldn't live with you another week. But I want to make it clear to you that, having accepted the fact of marriage, you cannot in reason be as independent and daringly unconventional in your dealings with men

as you were when you had no one to consider but yourself. I know India better than you do. We live in glass houses out here: and I know the sort of remarks that are made about a young married woman who is never seen without half a dozen men at her heels . . . ”

“ But, my dear man,” she broke out impatiently, “ who cares one grain of dust what their remarks may be? Men are my natural - born companions. Always have been. Always will be. And it’s no use asking me to cramp and distort my whole nature because bourgeois people take a low view of the matter.”

“ No use, is it? That’s pretty strong, Quita. Not that I *am* asking anything of the kind: only that you should show some small consideration for my point of view; that you should make some effort to adapt yourself to a new relation.”

“ I *do* make an effort, Eldred,” she answered unpeased. “ But individuality and temperament are stubborn things, even in a woman; and I can’t sacrifice mine because I happen to be your wife. Marriage doesn’t change one into an invertebrate creature of wax and pack-thread to be moulded or pushed into any shape a man pleases; especially if one happens to be an artist as well as a woman. We have our own devils inside us; our own minds and bodies as well as you. It wouldn’t be the least use my promising to walk discreetly and weigh my words and actions; because I shouldn’t keep the promise for five minutes. Besides . . . ” Returning steps sounded without, and Lenox held up his hand.

“ That’s enough,” he said decisively. “ Here’s Dick. You’re simply telling me, in roundabout language, that you intend to take the bit between your teeth. Well, I intend to keep a firm hold on the reins for your sake as much as my own.”

She flushed hotly.

“ *Mon Dieu*, what a detestable simile!”

“ Quite so. But it expresses the position. If you will make it a case of mastery, what else can a man do?”

And as Richardson entered from the dining-room, Lenox went out by way of the verandah into his study.

CHAPTER XXXI.

“When the fight begins within himself,
The man’s worth something.”

—BROWNING.

LENOX, back at his writing-table, automatically took up his pen. But five minutes later he still sat thus, looking straight ahead of him into a future darkened by the encroaching shadow of opium, and complicated by this new factor of open discord, which—apart from the pain of finding division, where he had looked for unity—set all his nerves on edge.

Hitherto, his distaste for friction, coupled with an almost unlimited power of endurance, had inclined him to let matters slide. But now his conscience—the accusing, spiritual thing that was himself—warned him that if marriage meant compromise, it also meant responsibility; that having been goaded into decisive speech, he stood pledged to decisive action, for her sake, even more than for his own. Yet, at the moment, he felt physically and mentally unfit to grapple with the complex situation, hampered as he was by the experience of all that may spring from one false move, one instant of unguarded speech; and the knowledge that his insight, his judgment, were clouded by the insomnia, grinding headache, and renewed wrestling with a power stronger than his will. For there was no evading the truth, that, in the past weeks, the drug had gained fresh hold upon him; had resuscitated the old paralysing pessimism and dread of defeat, so that he asked himself bitterly what right had he to sit in judgment upon any one, least of all upon the dear woman who was the core and mainspring of his life?

Yet, fit or unfit, the need for action, for the rightful assertion of authority, remained. He laid down his pen, planted an elbow on the table, and covered his eyes; struggling for clear unprejudiced thought; tormented by the consciousness of a certain small box hidden away in a locked drawer within easy reach of his hand.

Suddenly he sat upright. The lines of his face hard-

ened ; a cold moisture broke out upon his forehead ; and the desperate look in his eyes was an ill thing to see. Yet his movements had a strange mechanical deliberation, as he opened the drawer, found the box, helped himself from its contents, and, locking it up again, leaned back with the long exhausted sigh of a man released from tension.

For several minutes he sat thus, arms folded, eyes closed ; yielding himself to the luxury of relief that stole over him, while the great magician plucked the pain from throbbing nerves, unravelled the tangle of thought and feeling, soothed brain and body like the touch of a woman's hand.

But relief, as always, brought revulsion ; this time sooner than usual ; because for many days he had held his own against the evil thing, and had almost begun to believe himself on the upward grade.

"Damnation !" he broke out fiercely, and, the key being still in his hand, flung it haphazard right across the room. It fell between a heavy bookcase and the wall ; and with a savage laugh of satisfaction, he took up his pen, and began to write rapidly, without pausing to select words or phrases. He tore it all up next morning, but for the time being it served to distract his thoughts.

Presently he heard Quita's voice at the door.

"Eldred, aren't you coming to tea ?"

"No," he answered, without looking round.

"Shall I bring you some, then ?"

"No, thank you."

He turned his head just in time to catch sight of her as she closed the door ; then went on writing with less regard than ever for the matter in hand.

In less than half an hour, Richardson's uneven footstep, betraying the slight limp, sounded without. He paused so long on the other side of the door, that Lenox's brows went up in surprise.

"That you, Dick ?" he called out. "Come along in."

Richardson obeyed ; and Lenox removed three or four books from an adjacent chair.

"Sit down, old chap. You've not been in here often enough lately. Chained to my wife's easel, eh ?"

"Partly . . . yes," the other answered, absently fingering some loose sheets of manuscript and ignoring the proffered chair.

"Wasn't sure, either, if you cared about being interrupted. I came in now to say I thought of dining at mess to-night, and clearing out into my own bungalow to-morrow. You've been uncommonly good to me, you and Mrs Lenox. But I think I've been quartered on you long enough; and I shall probably get back to duty next week."

He spoke rather rapidly, as if to ward off interruption or dissent; and Lenox started at finding the initiative thus taken out of his hands. It was not Quita's doing. He felt sure of that. But Dick's manner puzzled him; and mere friendliness made acquiescence impossible.

"Well, you seem in a deuce of a hurry to be quit of us," he said, with a short laugh. "Might as well stop till you do get back to duty; and you might as well sit down and have a smoke, now you're here, instead of standing there like a confounded subordinate, making havoc of my papers!"

At that Richardson sat down rather abruptly, and helped himself from his friend's cigar-case. He had small talent and less taste for subterfuge; and, his pulses being in an awkward state of commotion, he took his time over the beheading and lighting of his cigar. In fact he took so long that Lenox spoke again.

"What do you suppose my wife will say to your bolting in this way, at a moment's notice? Have you spoken to her yet?"

"No. I was afraid of seeming . . . ungracious; and one could speak straighter to you."

"Does that mean you really won't stop on?"

"I think not, thanks. It's awfully good of you to suggest it. I can look in, of course, if Mrs Lenox wants any more sittings. But I may as well stick to my arrangement and go before she gets sick of having me on her hands."

"You're a long way ahead of that, I fancy," Lenox remarked, with an odd change of tone.

For a statement of that kind Richardson had no answer.

He could only acknowledge it with a rueful smile that did not lift the shadow from his eyes. There were no sunbeams caught in Quita's 'bits of sea water' just then; and for a while silence and tobacco-smoke reigned in the room. Richardson, who appeared to be reading the closely written sheet of foolscap at his elbow, was casting about in his mind for the best means of saying that which must be said; while Lenox, watching him keenly, arrived at the masculine conclusion that Dick had 'come a cropper' over something, and possibly needed his help.

"Anything on your mind, old chap?" he asked bluntly, when the silence had lasted nearly five minutes. And Richardson, taking his resolution in both hands, looked up from the meaningless page.

"Yes, that's about it. Don't misunderstand me, Lenox. I'd sooner work with you than with any man in creation; but—there are difficulties . . . I can't put it plainer—and I'm thinking of applying for a Staff appointment. My uncle in the Secretariat would give me a helping hand, if you'd forward the thing with a decent recommendation. But if you think me too much of a duffer for Staff work, I must try—for an exchange—"

He could get no further; and Lenox, leaning across the corner of the table, scrutinised his face with eyes that penetrated like a searchlight.

"Well . . . I'm damned!" he said slowly. "Am I to understand that after all we've pulled through together, you want to get away from the Battery at any price?"

"It's not a question of what I want to do; it's what I've got to do," the other answered, averting his eyes.

"My good Dick, you're talking in riddles. Have you taken temporary leave of your senses? Or is it a case of 'urgent private affairs'?"

Lenox's tone had an edge to it. Of course the man was free to go where he chose. But it had grown to be an understood thing between them that they would work together as long as might be, and he could not conceal his disappointment. Richardson knew this, and looked up quickly. It was the worst quarter of an hour he had ever known. Facing Waziri bullets was a small matter

compared with this despicable business of disappointing and deceiving his friend.

"It's urgent enough, God knows!" he answered desperately. "I can't say more than that, Lenox. I swear I can't."

He looked straight at Lenox in speaking. And this time the older man's gaze held him, in spite of himself, till the blood burned under his fair skin; till he perceived, between shame and relief, that his secret was his no longer; that Lenox had seen, and understood. His first instinct was—to escape. Such knowledge shared was enough to strike any man dumb.

"You *will* recommend me, won't you, old chap?" he asked all in a breath, with a forward movement, as if to rise and depart.

But Lenox reached across the table, and a heavy hand on his shoulder pressed him back into his seat.

"No need to hurry away, Max. We've settled nothing yet."

The assurance of unshaken friendship in his altered manner, and in the sudden use of Richardson's first name, automatically readjusted the situation, without need of so much as a glance of mutual understanding, which neither could have endured.

"I'm afraid I can't recommend you for Staff work," Lenox went on quietly, as though dealing with a mere official detail, submitted for his approval. "Not because you are a duffer, but because I can't spare my right-hand man. I'm not an easy chap to work with, as you know. But we've learnt one another's ways by now, and, unless political work claims me, we can't do better than run the Battery together till you get a command—and that's not far off now. As for your urgent need of a change, if six months at home would suit you, I'll do my best to square it. We might manage sick-leave, on the strength of your leg, eh?"

Richardson breathed deeply.

"Thank you, Lenox. It's splendid of you. I'd be awfully glad of the change."

"That's all right. And I tell you what, Dick," he paused, and smiled upon his friend. "Hope I'm not

taking an infernal liberty ! But if you can afford it—and if you can hit on the right girl—you might do worse than bring a wife back with you. You're the sort that's bound to marry some time, and you may take my word for it, thirty's a better age to start than thirty-five."

Richardson laughed, and coloured again, hotly.

"It takes two to make that sort of start," he said. "And if a fellow hits on the wrong one, it must be the very devil."

"Yes, by Jove, it must!" Lenox answered feelingly; adding in his own mind that even with the right one, it could be the very devil, now and again. "Think of poor Norton. But you'll have better luck, I hope. About stopping on for the present, of course you must please yourself. You'd be very welcome; and if you're afraid of taking up too much of my wife's time, you can easily give me more of your company than you have done so far. See how you feel about it to-morrow."

"Thanks, I will."

He rose now unhindered; and stood a moment hesitating, fired with a very human wish to express his gratitude. But Lenox had accepted and dismissed the whole incident in a fashion at once so impersonal, so chivalrous, that his aching sense of disloyalty and unworthiness seemed to have been tacitly wiped out, leaving one only course open to him—to act as though that culminating hour of madness had never been.

"See you again before I start for mess," he said, as Lenox looked up. And the dreaded interview—that should have broken up everything, yet had altered nothing, save his own estimate of life—was over.

Lenox, left alone again, bowed his head upon his hands, and sat a long time motionless, while the white flame of anger leaped and burned in his brain; anger such as he had never yet felt towards his wife. The spirit of his formidable uncle still so far survived in him that instinctively he blamed the woman; blamed himself also because pride and a strong distaste for self-assertion had inclined him to an attitude of masterly inactivity. In this fine fashion, between them, they had rewarded Dick for an unrecognised act of gallantry that might well have cost

him his life; and nothing now remained but to make such inadequate atonement as the case admitted. Strange as it may seem, he had never come so near to loving his friend as at that moment.

As for Quita—was there even the remotest chance that she also . . . ? His brain refused to complete such a question. The thing was unthinkable. But in any case his own duty stood out crystal clear. When he had mastered his anger sufficiently to risk speech, he and she must come to terms upon this thorny subject once for all. And he must take his stand upon the bare rock of principle. Let her brand him bourgeois, Covenanter, what she would. Dick's secret must be kept—at any cost !

CHAPTER XXXII.

“Love's strength standeth in Love's sacrifice,
And he who suffers most has most to give.”

—HAMILTON KING.

DINNER that evening was an oppressively silent affair. The man's white Northern anger still smouldered beneath his surface immobility; while Quita, who could not bring herself to believe in the spontaneity of Richardson's engagement at mess, was instinctively measuring and crossing swords with the husband, whose personality held her captive even while it forced her every moment nearer to the danger-point of open defiance.

Both were thankful when the solemn farce of eating and drinking came to an end; and Quita rose with an audible sigh of relief.

“Are you coming into the drawing-room at all?” she asked, addressing the question to his centre shirt-stud.

“Yes—at once. I have a good deal to say to you.”

She raised her eyebrows with a small polite smile, and swept on before him, her step quickened by the fact that his words had set the blood rushing through her veins.

The dead weight of his silence pulverised her. Speech, however dangerous, would be pure relief.

Before following, he locked up spirit tantalus and cigar-box with his wonted deliberation; and on reaching the drawing-room found her absorbed in contemplation of Dick's portrait, hands clasped behind her, the unbroken lines of her grey-green dress lending height and dignity to her natural grace; the glitter of defiance gone out of her eyes.

Lenox set his lips, and confounded the advantages nature and art conspire to bestow upon some women, more especially when they know themselves beloved. The mere man in him had one impulse only,—to take instant possession of her; to conquer her lurking antagonism by sheer force of passion and of will. But he had sense enough to know that such primitive methods would not shift, by one hair's-breadth, their real point of division; would, in fact, be no less than inverted defeat. The heart of her was secure:—that he knew. It was her detached, elusive mind and spirit that were still to win; and a man's arms had small concern with that form of capture.

Quita vouchsafed him a glance as he entered. Then her gaze returned to the picture.

“One misses him,” she said, presumably to the tall figure on the hearth-rug. “I think I have never known a man so uniformly cheerful and sweet-tempered. But it is selfish to grudge him a little change of atmosphere. And no doubt he is having a livelier evening than we are.”

She was facing her husband now; but something in his aspect made her feel suddenly ashamed of using small weapons against a nature too magnanimous to retaliate. And, without giving him time to answer, she went on, a little hurriedly, “Eldred, if this intolerable state of things means that you really imagine I am—how does one put anything so detestable?—growing . . . too fond of Mr Richardson, you can set your mind at rest. Morality apart, you are much too masterful, too large—in every way—to leave room for any one else in a woman's heart, once she has let you in.”

"Thank you," Lenox answered, in a non-committal tone. But a shadow passed from his face, and she saw it.

"Of course I know it has been rather marked this last week. But that was simply because for the moment he and my picture were the same thing. Being absorbed in one meant being absorbed in the other. To produce a living portrait, one needs to get inside the subject of it as far as possible. At least, I do. And on the whole, I think my method is justified by the result!"

But Lenox, as he stood listening, experienced fresh proof of man's innate spirit of perversity. For many days past he had been angered by the suspicion that in this affair of portrait painting, the subject counted for too much;—and now, when he ought to have been relieved, he found his anger rekindled to white heat by Quita's frank confession that his friend—whose heart had been wrenched from him by her so-called 'method'—counted for nothing at all. For one ignoble instant, he was tempted to break through every restraining consideration and lash her with the truth.

The fact that he did not answer her at once puzzled Quita.

"Do you understand now, *mon ami*?" she asked, coming a step closer. "I was absorbed in an interesting subject. It is over—*voilà tout*."

"No, Quita; I do not understand," he answered, repressed heat hardening his voice and face more than he knew. "To a mere soldier it all sounds rather inhuman; and I can only say that if you find it so necessary to 'get inside' your subjects, as you express it, you had better make women and children your speciality, and let us poor devils alone."

"Women and children? But, my dear—what a suggestion! One does not choose one's subjects to order. Women and children don't interest me. I have always preferred to paint men, and always shall."

"Then I'm afraid it may end in your having to drop portrait painting altogether."

That touched the artist to the quick. With a small gasp—as if he had struck her—she sank upon the arm of

his big chair; her hands clasped, so that the knuckles stood out sharp and white; two spots of fire burning in her cheeks.

"Do you seriously mean—what you say?" she asked, pausing between the words.

"Certainly. I am not given to speaking at random."

"You mean—you would insist?"

"I hope it would never come to that."

"*Mon Dieu*, no. It never would!" She flung up her head with a broken sound between a laugh and a sob. "Because—if it ever did—"

She hung on the word a moment; and in a flash Lenox saw how near they were to repeating the initial tragedy of more than six years ago.

"Quita," he broke in sharply, "listen to me before you say unconsidered things that we may both of us regret. Are we going to make havoc of everything again at the outset? Tell me that."

"How do I know? It depends on you. I think I told you then, that you might as well expect me to give up seeing or hearing as to give up my art. And that is truer—ten times truer—to-day, even though I am . . . your wife."

He saw her vibrating like a smitten harp-string; saw the quick rise and fall of the lace at her breast; and it was all a man could do to keep his hands off her. He had to remind himself that she was no child to be comforted with empty kisses; but very woman and very artist, torn between the master-forces of life.

"See here, lass," he said quietly, laying aside his half-smoked cigar. "As this is a big matter for us both, we may as well get at the root of it straight away. You said this afternoon that you could not give up your individuality because you had accepted marriage. Very well. Neither can I. That still leaves us two alternatives. Either we must give up the notion of living together; or we must be prepared to make concessions—both of us. That is why I said that marriage means compromise. If we go on much longer as we have been doing lately, seeing next to nothing of one another because the house has been converted into a surplus club

for half the fellows in the station ; and if you are going to spend your time 'getting inside' other men with a view to painting their portraits, we shall simply drift apart as the Nortons did. Conditions of life out here make that sort of thing fatally easy to fall into. But I tell you plainly that if there is to be no attempt at amalgamation, if we are each to go our own way, then—we must lead separate lives. I would not even have you in India. It would be a case of going home."

The two spots of fire had died out of her face, and she turned wide, startled eyes upon him.

"I don't—quite understand." Her voice was barely audible. "Are you telling me—to go?"

"My dear—can you ask that? I am only pointing out the conditions that might make such a catastrophe—inevitable. Looking things in the face may prevent future friction and misunderstanding, which are the very devil. What's more, I never realised till lately what a very big factor your art is in your life. I believe it is the biggest thing of all. Am I right?"

"I don't know. I can't tell—yet."

He straightened himself, and his face hardened.

"You can easily find out by putting the matter to practical proof. In fact, I am going to make a proposal that will not leave you very long in doubt. You have genius, Quita. I recognise that. And I want you to think seriously over all you said this afternoon about not cramping or distorting your individuality to suit my 'prejudices.' If you feel that your art must come before everything, that marriage will only hamper its full development, without making good what you lose,—in fact, if you think that the purely artist life will be better and happier for you in the long-run, I would sooner you said so frankly. I would indeed."

"Eldred!" she gasped, between indignation and fear. But he motioned her to silence.

"Hear me out first. I told you I had a good deal to say ; and as I am not often taken that way, you must bear with me, for once. You know now something, at least, of what it means for a man and woman to live together, as we do. I warned you that I should prove a

sorry bargain ; and — take me or leave me — I cannot pretend that any amount of compromise will make me other than I am. You think me hard, narrow, conventional, in some respects, no doubt. But in a matter so vital conventional moralities go for nothing. I want the truth. If you believe, as I said, that art must stand first with you—always, I shall respect your frankness and courage in telling me so ; and I will give you—such freedom as the circumstances admit."

"*Mon Dieu !*" she breathed, and for a second or two could say no more. She had touched the bed-rock of granite in the man at last. Then the fear that clutched at her found words, in her own despite.

"Have I killed—your love, so soon ? Surely you could not make such a suggestion—in cold blood, unless—I had."

"You are simply shifting the argument," he answered without unbending. "You know whether—I love you. In fact, if it comes to that, it is you, my dear, who have not yet grasped the full meaning of the word, or you would not need to be told that the free choice I am offering you of compromise with me, or independence—without me, is the utmost proof one can give that you and your happiness stand absolutely first—"

At that she made an impulsive movement towards him, and her fingers closed upon his arm. But with inexorable gentleness he unclasped her hand, and put it from him.

"No, no," he said, and there was more pain than hardness in his tone. "Better keep clear of that form of argument, for the present. Passion settles nothing. Contact is not fusion. We have proved it,—you and I. It is not a question of what we feel. That may be taken for granted by now. It is a question of what we are, individually, intrinsically ; of how much each of us is ready to forego for the sake of the one essential form of union that counts between a man and woman who are not mere materialists ; and we are neither of us that. I don't want my answer to-night, nor even to-morrow. I have not spoken on impulse ; and I want you to think very thoroughly over all I have said when your brain is cooler than it is just now."

"But suppose—I don't want to think it over?"

A half smile dispelled his gravity. "Knowing you intimately, I should not suppose anything else! In the two big crises of our life, remember, you were ruled purely by impulse and emotion, and you brought us very near to shipwreck in consequence. But this time, you will do what I ask, and give my slower methods a chance; because this time your decision will be final. If we are to separate again, we separate for life. That much *I* have decided. The rest—I leave in your hands."

She stood very still, like one magnetised, her gaze riveted on the carpet. His steadfast aloofness had chilled her first headlong impulse of surrender; and she knew now that he was right:—that, dearly as she loved him, independence in thought, word, and act were still the breath of life for her and for her art. He had put the matter to practical proof with a sledge-hammer directness all his own; had opened her eyes to the humiliating truth that never in all her thirty years of living had she given up anything that mattered for any one. And now—

She raised her head with a start. Zyarulla had brought in a telegram, and Lenox stood reading it with a transfigured face, an eager light in his eyes.

"What is it?" she wondered, not daring to ask. "He is going away somewhere—he is delighted. And he says I come absolutely first."

Then Lenox raised his eyes, and a lightning instinct told her that for the moment he had forgotten her existence.

"Well, Quita," he said, unconscious elation in his tone, "I think the Foreign Office must have known we had got to a difficult corner, and decided to give us a helping hand. They want me to undertake an exploration north of Kashmir, and remonstrate with a small chief who has been misbehaving up there. I am to report myself at Simla *ek dum*,¹ to receive detailed instructions of the mission, and we shall have time enough to think things out very thoroughly before I get back."

"Time? How long?"

¹ At once.

Her colour had ebbed; but the change in him had steeled her to unreasoning hardness of heart.

“Six months, certain. Possibly more.”

“And you are as glad as you can be. One sees that quite plainly.”

Her tone stung him to sharp retort.

“Yes, I *am* glad—since you insist; and since I am no hypocrite.”

Pride would not suffer her to remind him of his assurance, “You stand absolutely first.” Instead she asked him in a repressed voice—

“Doesn’t it occur to you, after your eloquence about what each of us should give up, that this is precisely where *your* share of the compromise comes in?”

“It occurred to me nearly a year ago,” he said simply. “After our talk at Kajiar, I faced the fact that there was an end of my exploring as a hobby;—at least on the big scale that appeals to me most. It was just the price one had to pay for getting you back again; and I paid it—willingly. In fact, I should never have mentioned it, if you hadn’t dragged it out of me.”

The quiet of his tone, and the kindness in the blue eyes that challenged her own, brought the blood into her face. He shamed her every way, this big husband of hers. He had counted the cost and paid it—willingly. He would not even have mentioned it. There you have the essence of the man. Her lids fell, and her incurable instinct for comedy set a faint dimple in her cheek. Here he was at his old trick of dragging her on to higher ground; and the perverse spirit of her loved and hated him for it in one breath.

“But you are going now?” she whispered, without looking up.

“Certainly. That is quite another matter. When Government needs my services for work which I have made a speciality, it would be neither right nor possible for me to refuse; and, frankly, I am glad, because I love the work, fully as much as you love yours; and because the opportunity could hardly have come at a better moment.”

“And I—go back to Michael?”

"Yes. For six months you will be free to travel, paint—what you will; and for six months I shall have my mountains to grapple with." Again the light sprang to his eyes. "By the end of that time we shall know once for all how much we are ready to forego for the sake of spending our lives together. That is the ultimate test of a big thing, Quita—what one will give up for it. Marriage *is* a big thing; and if ours is built on the right foundations, it will stand the test. Now, I shall have a good deal to see to this evening, and I think you had better go to bed early. You look tired."

"I am tired." She realised suddenly that all the spring had gone out of her. "When do you leave?"

"To-morrow, most likely. You had better write to Michael."

"Very well. I suppose—one will be able to write to *you*?"

"Yes. Now and then. But for a great part of the time I shall be beyond the reach of posts."

Though his surface hardness had melted, his voice had an impersonal note that crushed her, making her feel as if she were dealing with a cosmic force, rather than a human being;—one of his own detestable mountains, for instance. But for that, it is conceivable that there might have been something approaching a 'scene'; that she might have obeyed her unreasoning impulse to plead with him, and exhort him not to push his test of her to such pitiless lengths. As it was, she sank into a chair without answering; and he turned towards the study with a new lift of his head, a new elasticity of step that struck at her heart.

For, in truth, until he read that summons from Simla he had scarcely known how irresistibly the old free life drew him; how the white silence of the mountains called to him as friend calls friend; and the whole heart of him answered, 'I come.' 'As the dew is dried up by the sun, so are the sins of mankind by the glory of Himachal.' The words of the old Hindoo worshipper sprang to his brain, and for him they were no fanciful imagery, but a radiant truth. Six months of the Himalayas, six months of freedom from brain work, and headache, and strain,—

for though loyalty denied it, the past month had been a strain,—would suffice to break the power of the hideous thing that was sapping his manhood; to dispel the great black something that shadowed his mind and spirit—to set him on his feet again, a free man.

But since he had kept the deeper source of his trouble secret from Quita, she did not hold the key to the deeper source of his joy. And now, lying back in his chair, her eyes closed, violet shadows showing beneath the black line of her lashes, she saw herself, momentarily, as a trivial thing—a mere tangle of nerves, perversity, and egotism—flung aside without hesitation, perhaps even with relief, at the first call of the larger life, the larger loyalty. Two tears stole out on to her lashes, and slipped down her cheek. Mere concessions to overwrought feeling, and she knew it; knew, in the depths of her, that she was no triviality, but a woman into whose hands power had been given; the power of things primeval that are the mainspring of life.

For Quita also had her secret—at once mysterious and disturbing; since to your highly-strung woman motherhood rarely comes as a matter of course—a secret that brought home to her, with a force as quiet and compelling as her husband himself, the awful sense of the human bond. He had told her she was free to choose; to take him or leave him as she saw fit. But the dice were loaded. They were bound to one another now by a far stronger power than mere law; by the power of action and consequence, which transcends all laws.

She had guessed the truth, and rebelled against it, on that day when Honor had unwittingly spoken the right word at the right moment, as those who believe in Divine transmission through human agency are apt to do. She had faced and accepted it during Eldred's absence; but had not found courage since his return to put it into words; had, in fact, with the revival of inspiration, thrust the knowledge aside, and deliberately tried to forget.

Now it came back upon her, unrebuked; and while she lay thinking over all that had passed between them, one insistent question repeated itself in her brain, "Can I tell him? Shall I tell him before he goes?" And after

much debating, she decided on silence. In the first place, he would be saved anxiety if he should not return in time; and in the second place—though this consideration stood undeniably first with her—she preferred that he, at least, should believe in the fiction of their freedom; that nothing should weigh with him, or draw him back to her but his unalterable need of herself. How far her secret was her own to hide or reveal, how far she had any right to withhold such knowledge from the man on the eve of a perilous undertaking,—the man to whom insight told her it would mean immeasurably much,—were questions that simply did not enter her mind. The artist's egotism, and the woman's love of dominion, left no room for fine-drawn scruples of the kind. Never till to-night had she realised how the mountains claimed and held him; and in her sudden fear of losing him, either through misadventure or through the reawakening of the explorer in him, she lost sight of the original point at issue; of the fact that it was her own work, not his, which had threatened to stand between them.

An hour later she went into the study, where Lenox, his brow furrowed into deep lines, bent over an outspread map. A glance showed her that already in spirit he was miles away from her, planning the exploration of passes and glaciers guessed at in former journeyings, engrossed, mind and heart, in the possibilities ahead.

She came and stood beside him. "I am going now, Eldred," she said, a touch of listlessness in her tone.

He looked up and nodded. "That's right. You *do* look rather fagged this evening."

"Only a headache," she answered, flushing and avoiding his eyes. "I shall be all right if I sleep well."

"Do you ever sleep badly?" he asked, with the quick sympathy of the sufferer.

"Oh dear, no." She hesitated. "Are you coming?"

"Yes—later."

Still she stood irresolute. Caresses had become rare between them of late; and now pride as well as shyness checked her natural impulse. In turning away, she allowed her left hand to swing outward, ever so little,

merely by way of experiment. "He won't see it," she told herself. And, as if in mute denial, his own hand met and grasped it, close and hard.

On the threshold she paused and looked back. He was miles away again, hopelessly out of reach. A sudden thought seized her, tempted her. Half a dozen words would suffice to snap the chain that held him; to bring her into his arms. Yet now it seemed impossible to speak them, even if she would; and she went out, leaving him in undisturbed possession of his maps and his mountains.

She lingered long over her undressing; and when it was over could not bring herself to put out the lamp; but lay, waiting and listening for his coming. Then, as the night slipped away and the silence became a burden, a dead weight upon brain and heart, the old haunting dread of those days in Dalhousie came back upon her, and she shivered. The Pagan in her leaned too readily to superstitious fancy, and her dread shaped itself finally in a definite thought. "If he comes to me now, I know I shall conquer the mountains in the end. But if he doesn't come, they will be too strong for me. They will take him from me for good."

And he did not come, till one of the morning; when he found her fast asleep, the lamp still burning beside her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"Ledge by ledge outbroke new marvels, now minute, and now immense :
Earth's most exquisite disclosure, heaven's own God in evidence!"

—BROWNING.

"SAHIB, dinner is ready."

"I also am ready. More than ready!" Lenox answered, a twinkle in his eyes.

Zyarulla responded by a gleam of teeth as he followed his master to the camp fire of roots and scrub, on whose summit 'dinner' was served steaming hot; a delectable

mass of mutton and rice, eaten straight from the copper cooking vessel, lest the ice-bound breath of the mountains freeze it before it could reach its destination. The fire itself was small, and gave out little heat: for in the heart of the glaciers, sixteen hundred feet up, fuel is scarce, and even more precious than food.

The five human forms, crouching close to it, had been Lenox's sole companions through three months of hardship and danger, sweetened by the exhilaration of conquering such difficulties as brace a man's nerve and fortitude to the utmost. Four of them were Gurkhas,—a Havildar and three men; short, sturdy hill folk of the Mongol type, with the spirits of schoolboys and the grit of heroes. The fifth was a Pathan from Desmond's regiment, told off to act as orderly and surveyor; a man of immovable gravity, who shared but two qualities with the thick-headed, stout-hearted little soldiers from Nepal:—courage of the first order, and devotion to the British officer, for whom any one of them would have laid down his life, if need be; not as a matter of sentiment or heroism, but simply as a matter of course. The Gurkhas had, in fact, settled it among themselves before starting, that if any harm came to the Sahib none of them were to disgrace the name of the regiment by returning without their leader.

Now, as he neared the fire, looking bigger and broader than usual in his sheep-skin coat and Balaklava cap,—his jaw and throat protected by a beard black as his hair,—all five stood up to receive him: and the quivering light showed that they also were muffled to the eyes.

“It is a *burra khana*¹ to-night, Hazúr,” the Havildar informed him with a chuckle; his slits of eyes vanishing as his teeth flashed out. “In a treeless country, the castor-oil is a big plant! And the cook, having three handfuls of flour to spare, hath made us three *chupattis*; one for your Honour, and one to be broken up among ourselves.”

“No, no, Havildar; fair play,” Lenox answered, smiling. “We will divide the three.”

But seeing that insistence would damp their childish

¹Big dinner.

spirit of festivity, he accepted Benjamin's portion ; and satisfied his conscience by sharing it with Brutus, the inevitable, who snuggled contentedly under a corner of his poshteen, and thanked his stars he was not as other dogs, a mere loafer round clubs and cantonments. It was bad to be cold and hungry ; to plunge shoulder-deep through snow, and slither across hideous slopes of ice ; but it was uplifting to share your master's dinner and your master's bed ; and there are few things more sustaining than a sense of one's own importance in the general scheme of things !

The fire was their mess-table, round which they dined together, to save time and trouble in cooking ; and also because community of hardship and danger links men to one another with hooks of steel ; dispels all minor distinctions of colour and creed ; reveals the Potter's raw material underlying all.

And while they so sat, enjoying their one-course dinner as no gourmet ever enjoyed a city feast, night and frost crept stealthily, almost visibly, over the stupendous snow-peaks and pinnacles of opaque ice that towered on all sides, breathing out cold ; and contemplating, as if in silent amazement, these atoms of 'valiant dust' who dared and were beaten back, and dared again ; who day by day pushed farther into their white sanctuary of silence, in search of a pass whose existence was guessed at rather than known. At sunset there had been a brief burst of colour,—green and opal and rose ; but by now the mountains shimmered grey and hard as steel under the tremulous fire of the stars ; and every moment the grip of frost tightened upon half-melted glacier, upon man and beast. For behind the little group of servants, who sat apart, enjoying their own meal in their own fashion, stood twelve apathetic Kashmiri ponies,—unconsidered martyrs to man's lust of achievement,—who endured to the full the miseries of mountaineering, and reaped none of its rewards.

Dinner over, the fire must be allowed to die down. A pipe over the embers, and a sheep-skin bag shared with Brutus, was the evening's unvarying programme on this detached expedition into the hidden core of things ; tents

and lesser luxuries having been left with the heavy baggage in charge of two Gurkhas at the foot of the pass.

While Lenox sat smoking, and encouraging the fire to keep alive as long as might be, his men vied with one another in discovering sheltered corners for the night. The Havildar was in high spirits after his morsel of *chupatti*, washed down with a mouthful of rum; and the laughter of his comrades echoed strangely among the ghostly peaks.

"You seem to be in great form, Chundra Sen," Lenox called out at last. "What's the joke now?"

"We are seeking soft stones to sleep on, Hazúr; and betting, like the *Sahiblög*, which of us shall find the softest!"

Lenox joined in the laugh that greeted this sally.

"Good men," he said. "Hope you find a few! First-rate joke of yours, Havildar."

"By ill fortune, it was not I who made it, Hazúr! But an officer Sahib, up in Kabul; one who knew that it is good to laugh even when the knife is at the throat." And the search went forward with renewed zest.

Apparently soft stones were forthcoming: for one by one the men rolled themselves up in their blankets and sheep-skins, and slept soundly on two hundred feet of ice under a freezing sky; leaving Lenox alone with his pipe and his thoughts, and the silence that dwelt like a presence in the eerie place.

As a rule a hard day on the glaciers left him so over-powered with sleep that he could scarcely finish his smoke: but to-night his brain was alert and active; stimulated by the knowledge that two more days of climbing ought to bring him at last to the Pass of his dreams:—the Pass that must be found and crossed in the teeth of all that Nature might do to hinder him!

That discovery would close the first phase of his journey: and to-night, looking back over it, from the day of his departure for Simla, he saw that it had been good.

Sir Henry Forsyth, Foreign Secretary, and an old school friend of his brother's, had instructed him to work his way up to Hunza, a small independent state north of Kashmir,

hidden among lofty mountains and impenetrable valleys, whence robber bands—secure from retaliation—had for long amused and enriched themselves by flying descents upon neighbouring tribes, and upon caravans passing from Asia to India. And now, after an unusually daring raid, the peace-loving Kirghiz of the district had appealed to the Indian Government for protection and help.

Lenox, with his little escort of six Gurkhas and one Pathan, was to enter this stronghold of brigands; reason with their chief, and bind him down to good behaviour for the future. In addition, Sir Henry suggested that instead of going to Hunza direct, he should strike out eastward from Kashmir, working his way round through the great Mustagh Mountains, and exploring as he went; also that he should finally push on northward, and penetrate as far into the Pamirs as the approach of winter would permit.

“There will be no difficulty with the authorities. I have arranged all that; and you need not be back at Dera till October or November,” the great man had concluded, in a tone half question, half command.

“No, sir. I may as well do all I can while I’m up there.”

Whereat Sir Henry had eyed him thoughtfully from between narrowed lids. For all his great brain, he was a man of one idea: and that idea—“The North safeguarded.” Mere men, himself included, were for him no more than pawns in the great game to be played out between two Empires, on the chess-board of Central Asia. But . . . there are pawns, and pawns: and Sir Henry had had his eye on Lenox for some years; recognising in him a pawn of high value; a man to be sent to the front on the first opportunity, and kept there as long as might be. The news of his marriage had been a shock to the Foreign Secretary: and it is conceivable that he had wished to test Lenox by asking him to undertake such a mission within a year of the fatal event. He was speculating now, as he watched him, how far the ‘woman complication’ was likely to count with this impenetrable Scot. With Sir Henry, after the first year or two, the woman had not counted at all: and, unhappily for her, she knew it.

The pause lasted so long that Lenox shifted his position:

but Sir Henry only said, "I was relieved when I got your wire."

"Surely I could not have answered otherwise?"

"I am glad you think so. But frankly, when I heard of your marriage, I was half afraid I had lost one of my ablest men."

Lenox smiled. "Not quite as bad as that, sir, I hope."

"Well then . . . what about Gilgit?"

Sir Henry spoke carelessly; but his eyes were on Lenox's face, and he saw him flinch.

"Is that likely to be an immediate contingency?" Lenox asked quietly.

"Next year, I should say, as things are going now."

"Well, I hope it may be possible. But . . . one would have to think it over."

"Talk it over, you mean . . . eh?"

Something in the tone angered Lenox.

"Yes, sir . . . talk it over. That is what I meant," he had answered, looking straightly at the other: and they had returned somewhat abruptly to the matter in hand.

But Lenox had dined with the Foreign Secretary that night, and they had parted good friends, as ever: Sir Henry begging the younger man to ask him for anything that might serve to lesson the hardships and dangers ahead of him, adding, as they shook hands: "I assure you, my dear fellow, we who sit in Simla fully realise how much the country owes to men of your sort; and grudge no money spent in making the way smoother for you."

But Lenox, knowing well that hardships and perils loom larger in an easy-chair than on the slope of a glacier, had asked for little, beyond permission to depart, and that speedily.

A few days at Pindi had sufficed for the collecting of stores and equipment. Then he had pushed northward in earnest, picking up his escort of Gurkhas from their station in the foot-hills: and so on through Kashmir, where spring had already flung her bridal veil over the orchards, and retreating snow-wreaths had left the hills carpeted with a mosaic of colour,—primula, iris, orchid, and groundlings innumerable: over the Zoji-la Pass, into the shadeless, fantastic desolation of Ladak; and on, across

stark desert and soundless snow-fields, to Leh, the terminus of all caravans from India and Central Asia. Here Lenox had spent two days with one Captain Burrows of the Bengal Cavalry, who, with a handful of half-starved Kashmiri soldiers, upheld the interests of the British Raj on this uttermost edge of Empire. Here also he found a letter from Quita; read and re-read it, and stowed it away in his breast-pocket, trying not to be aware of a haunting ache deep down in him, which must perforce be ignored. The old charm of the Road, the 'glory of going on,' that works like madness in the blood, was strong upon him as ever. But whereas, in former journeyings, he had been one man, he was now two. The whole-hearted ecstasy of travel would never again be his. He had given a part of himself into a woman's keeping; and let him put the earth's diameter between them, she would hold him still. Every week, every day that drew him farther from her did but bring home to him more forcibly the mysterious, compelling power of marriage, its large reserves of loyalty, its sacred and intimate revelations, its inexorable grip on life and character.

But meanwhile, there was the Road before him; a rough road, full of vicissitudes and anxieties, of interests and anticipations that left him small leisure for the communings of his heart.

Before leaving Leh, hill camels and ponies had been added unto him, besides twenty-one decrepit Kashmir soldiers,—a type extinct since they have been handled by British officers. These were to be deposited by Lenox at his so-called 'base of operations,' by way of guarding the trade route so grievously troubled by the brigand state.

Followed two more weeks of marching,—rougher marching this time,—through the core of the lofty mountains that divide India from Central Asia; across the terrible Depsang Plains, seventeen thousand feet up; and over four passes choked with snow; till they came upon a deserted fort, set in the midst of stark space, and knew that here, indeed, was the limit of human habitation. Next day the work of exploration had begun in earnest. Week after week, with unwearying persistence, they had pushed on, upward, always upward, through regions sacred to the

eagles and the clouds; working along streams that cut their way through hillsides steep as houses, or along tracks that ran to polished ledges of rock and dropped sheer to unimaginable depths; clambering over formidable ranges by any chance opening that could be dignified by the name of a pass; the eternally cheery Gurkhas solacing themselves with rum; the Pathans with opium; the Scot with rare nips of brandy, on the bitterest nights. Still more rarely,—at wider and wider intervals of time,—he drew from his breast-pocket a pill-box, like the one still locked in his writing-table drawer at home. Its contents were running very low by now; and, once gone, they would never again be replenished. That he knew; with a knowledge born not of arrogance, but of faith that somehow, somehow the right must prevail.

And to-night,—as he sat alone by the fire, watching the greyness of death quench spark after spark of living light, while a late moon sailed leisurely into view, overlaying the steely hardness of ice and snow with a veil of shimmering silver,—he took out the box, and opened it. He knew it held two pellets: no more. Why not take them at once, and so break the last link of the devil's chain? He turned them into his palm, . . . and paused, while the enemy within whispered words of seduction hard to be withstood. But now a second voice spoke in him also: a voice of mingled authority and pleading. Why not fling away both box and pellets, foregoing the final degradation, the final rapture, that every nerve in him clamoured for more imperatively than he dared admit even to himself.

For some reason the suggestion brought Desmond vividly to his mind:—Desmond, with his characteristic assertion: “Of course you will succeed. You have won the great talisman.” Yes. He was right!—‘the great talisman.’ Surely if marriage were worth anything, if it meant more to a man than mere domesticity, and material satisfaction, it ought by rights to act as a talisman to protect him from the evils of his baser self.

While thinking, he had mechanically returned the pellets to the box, closing it firmly, crushing it between his hands: and now, with a wide sweep of his arm, he

flung it far from him, into the blue-black mystery of a ravine that swooped past the camping-ground to the valley below.

“Thank God *that’s* done with!” he muttered; though as yet the pain rather than the elation of conquest prevailed. Then, lifting Brutus in his arms, as though he had been a child, he slipped, dog and all, into his sheep-skin bag, and slept without dreams.

An hour later, a sudden gust from the north swept down the ravine. Battalions of cloud blotted out the stars; and a host of snow-flakes whirled above the sleeping camp, like spirits of fairies, incapable of doing harm.

The chill discomfort of snow melting on their faces woke the men, one by one, at an unearthly hour, to find their whole world shrouded in white, and a mist of snow-dust still falling. But Lenox, undismayed, ordered tea and biscuits, and lost no time in setting out.

A stiff climb up the ravine into which he had flung his pill-box lay ahead of them: but since the side nearest the camp was unbroken glacier, it seemed wisest to hack their way across it before attempting the ascent.

It was freezing hard: earth and sky were muffled in fine white powder, and scudding clouds constantly hid the moon. An ice-slope overlaid with snow is not pleasant going at the best of times; and on this one there were ugly rents, into which men and animals slipped, to their sore discomfort. But the way of life is by courage and persistence: and in time the thing was done.

The farther side proved less formidable: and while they halted to recoup their energies, a report like thunder, followed by an unmistakable rushing sound, made every man of them catch his breath. It was an avalanche: and its appalling crescendo was coming straight down the hill on which they stood.

The two Pathans remained rigid, impassive,—the greater the danger the cooler do these men become: but the Kirghiz—a creature without self-respect—shook so violently that he dropped the bridles of his ponies.

“Run, Sahib . . . run!” he stammered. “Or we be all dead men.”

But there was nowhere to run to, even had running on an ice-slope been possible; which it was not. Neither was it possible to guess the exact direction of the invisible annihilation that was racing down upon them through a mist of snow. There was nothing for it but to stand steady—till that happened which must happen. So they stood steady, without speech or movement, like men turned to stone.

It may have been a matter of minutes. To Lenox it seemed a matter of years. Because, in that short breathing space, fear—overmastering fear—gripped him as it never yet had done. A year or two ago, for all his human love of life, he would have accepted a mountaineer's death with something of the same pride and stoicism as a soldier accepts death in battle. But now . . . now . . . life meant so infinitely more to him, that every throbbing artery and nerve rebelled against the loss of it. For it is happiness, more than conscience, that 'makes cowards of us all.'

Nearer and louder grew the appalling sound. Then a great cloud of snow-dust burst in their faces, half blinding them: and, with the roar of an express train, the avalanche sped down the ravine; burying the ice-slope they had just crossed; and obliterating their footsteps as man's work is obliterated by the soundless avalanche of the years.

All five men let out their breath in an audible murmur.

"*Burra tamasha*,¹ Hazûr," Yusuf Ali remarked gravely. "Never before have I seen the like."

But for the moment Lenox had lost his voice. Ten minutes' delay in starting, and they had been swept out of life, without a struggle or a cry. It is this significance of trifles in determining large issues that at times staggers faith and reason.

"The Sahib still goes forward?" the Pathan added presently, as one who merely asks for orders: and the Sahib nodded.

But this was too much for the Kirghiz. Emboldened by terror, he flung himself on the ground.

¹ Great excitement.

"I who speak am as dust beneath the feet of the Heaven-born. But consider, Hazúr, there will be many more such before the pass can be reached."

"It is possible," Lenox answered unmoved. "It is also possible that, like this one, they will keep out of our path. Make no more fool's talk. Go back to the ponies."

The Kirghiz was not mistaken. There were 'many more such' during the next few days. But Lenox was not mistaken either: for none of them came their way. Only the muffled thunder of their descent broke the stillness of a world whose mystery and grandeur surpassed anything Lenox himself had ever seen.

For on the second night, a night without wind or cloud, they camped in the heart of the great glacier: and all about them,—touched to ethereal unreality by the light of moon and stars,—were unnumbered crests and pinnacles, fantastically carven; black mouths of caverns, shaggy with icicles; sudden fissures and vast continents of shadow, like ink-stains on unsullied purity; and overarching all, the still wonder of the sky, pierced with points of flame.

Tired as he was, Lenox resented the need for shutting his eyes upon a scene so stirring alike to the imagination and the heart: a scene that lifted both, past Nature's uttermost sublime, to the Master-Builder, whose mind is the Universe, and whose thoughts are its stars and worlds, and the living souls of men. But for all that Nature had her way with him; sealing up eyes and mind with the double seal of weariness and the supreme content of the climber who knows that the summit is at hand.

And upon the fourth day, in a blaze of sunlight, that set the uncharted snow-fields glittering like dust of diamonds, they crossed the Pass,—Lenox's own Pass, that no living man had set eyes or foot upon,—and looked at last on that elusive 'other side,' that draws certain natures like a magnet to the far-flung limits of earth.

And in this case the other side proved well worth the hardships endured to reach it. After so many days cooped up between ice-walls and precipitous heights, Lenox caught his breath at the magnitude of the view outspread before him: an amphitheatre of 'the greater gods'; ridge

beyond ridge, peak beyond dazzling peak, stabbing the blue, the highest of them little lower than Everest's self: while across the rock-bound valley a host of glaciers, like primeval monsters, crept downward from the mountains that gave them birth.

As Lenox stood feasting his soul upon the splendour of it all, he knew that this was one of the great days of his life: that only Quita's inspiring presence was needed to crown the triumph of it. Even in the first glow of achievement, his heart turned instinctively to hers for sympathy and approval: and, could she have known it, her haunting fear that the mountains would prove too strong for her had crumbled into nothingness there and then. For if 'many waters cannot quench love,' neither can many mountains dwarf it. When all is said, it is still 'the great amulet that makes the world a garden'; and always will be, while God's men and women have red blood in their veins.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"And echo circles in the air,
Is this the end—is this the end?"

—TENNYSON.

SEPTEMBER was drawing to a close. Every day the sun fought a losing battle against the frost and bitter winds of the Pamirs, that pierce even through sheep-skin coats to the marrow of the bones; and every night the thermometer fell to zero, or below it. For winter begins betimes on the "Roof of the World."

On just such a night of keen stars, and still, penetrating cold, Lenox sat alone in his circular tent of felt and lattice-work—the one form of habitation used by the nomads of the district—his coat-collar turned up, a rug round his legs, his fingers numb and blue, writing up the official and private records of his week's work. In the middle of the floor a fire of roots flamed and crackled

cheerfully enough, the smoke, and most of the heat, escaping through a hole in the domed roof above. A felt rug or two, a camp chair and table, and three sheep-skin bags, laid out for sleeping, gave an air of rough comfort to the place. But with the thermometer at zero, fuel scarce, and provisions running very low, actual comfort was past praying for. Lenox shifted his chair an inch or two nearer the blaze, drawing the camp table along with him, and disturbing Brutus, who acted as foot-warmer in return for the privilege of sleeping under the rug.

"Sorry to shunt you, old chap," he apologised aloud. "But you're a deal better off down there than I am."

Sundry tappings on his left foot signified grateful acknowledgment of the fact, as Brutus settled himself afresh and dropped back into the land of dreams, whither Lenox would gladly have followed him. For the week had been a hard one, and he was very tired. The frost seemed to have gripped both body and brain, and too long a spell of mountaineering at high altitudes was beginning to tell upon his strength; so that he had been thankful for the flat expanses of the Pamirs, which had made riding possible and pleasant once again.

His entrance into the brigand state, and his polite, but unequivocal ultimatum to its insubordinate chief had been carried through, not without moments of uncertainty and danger, yet with complete success, and throughout the past six weeks he had been enjoying his first big tour of that strange region of raised valleys and vast, wind-swept spaces where the boundary lines of three Empires meet.

Since the night when he had flung away the cherished pill-box that now lay regally entombed under fifty feet of snow, he had suffered no collapse. His gradual method of unwinding the chain had averted that final danger and degradation. But there had been days when all his training in self-discipline had been needed to restrain him from applying to Zyarulla, whose kummerbund held a perennial store of the precious drug,—the more so since his Ladaki 'cook'—chosen mainly for his powers of endurance—knew rather less about the primitive requirements of camp catering than Lenox himself; and in spite

of keen air and exercise his appetite had steadily fallen away. There were rare days, of course, when he could have eaten camel's flesh, and that gratefully; but there were many more when the mere man yearned towards the luxury of plate and silver, of varied meats, and the sparkle of an iced peg. To-night his 'dinner' consisted of a large cup of cocoa, some native biscuits, and a lump of milk-cheese made by the Khirgiz, whose domed huts and scattered flocks are the only signs of human life in this dry region of snow and sun and tireless wind.

On the table at his elbow, besides the steaming cocoa, were two camp candlesticks, some closely written sheets of a letter to Quita, and her last that had reached him outside Hunza five weeks ago. Each one he had received showed more clearly how the mysterious influence of absence was winning for him that volatile essence of her which had eluded his grasp throughout six months of personal contact, and years of unwearied devotion. Of the deeper, hidden forces at work on his behalf, he guessed nothing. Only he was aware of subtle changes taking place in her—of an indefinable softening and uplifting of the whole woman, that increased tenfold his longing for a reunion which promised to be closer, more consummate than the best that they had achieved as yet.

But to-night, because body and spirit were flagging unawares, the miles upon miles of inhospitable mountain country, that must be traversed before he could regain the outposts of civilised life, overpowered his imagination. To-night, for the first time, despondency and the ache of desire magnified the very real dangers ahead—the lateness of the season, the uncertainty of weather and supplies. Difficulties in respect of transport had obliged him to cut down his commissariat, despatching the remainder, with his heavy baggage, to await him on the Indian side of the Darkót Pass—the last great obstacle that cut him off from India, and from the dear woman, never dearer than at this moment. It was a risk, of course, and a big one. But mountaineering implies risks; and the man who is not prepared to face them, and sleep soundly on them, had better stick to his arm-chair and an office.

The original risk had been increased by the fact that his programme of exploration had taken longer than he calculated, and now ominous snow-clouds, a rapidly dwindling food supply, and his own importunate heart, urged an immediate start for the terrible Wakhan Valley and the Darkót Pass. It meant a race for life—that he saw plainly enough. The chances were ten to one against the Pass being open after the 1st of October—the earliest date by which he could hope to get across.

With a sigh, he closed his diaries, emptied the cup of cocoa at a gulp, and took out of his breast-pocket a folded leather frame. It contained a photo of Quita in evening dress—a photo so disturbingly alive that in general he contented himself with the knowledge that it was there. But now he sat looking at it long and intently, till the eyes seemed to soften and speech hovered on the too-expressive lips. Almost the music of her voice was in his ears, when the night's colossal stillness was broken by voices of a very different quality—the deep tones of the two Pathans and the interpreter, who, on this lightly-equipped expedition, were sharing his tent; while the six little Gurkhas, packed like sardines into a smaller one, seemed to find the experience as amusing as they found the whole varied field of life. It takes more than mere hardship to knock the spirits out of a Gurkha.

As the three men entered, Lenox slipped the frame back into his pocket; and, with a few friendly words, gave them leave to retire into their sleeping bags, while Zyarulla laid out his master's 'bed' on the farther side of the fire. That done, he came forward, and, squatting on his heels, held out fingers like knotted twigs to the blaze. Lenox, under a pretence of reading, sat watching him spellbound, knowing precisely what would happen next. Nor was he mistaken. Presently the thawed fingers fumbled at his kummerbund, produced a discoloured twist of paper, opened it, and taking out two familiar dark pellets, tossed them down his throat. In the act he met his master's gaze fixed on him with strange intensity, and at once two more pellets appeared upon his palm.

"Will not the Sahib honour his servant by partaking also?" he asked, proffering his treasure. "The cold

increaseth every hour, and the Heaven-born hath had too little food to-day."

It was a moment before Lenox could find his voice; not because temptation mastered him, but because he could scarcely believe the evidence of his brain. The sight of the forbidden thing within easy reach no longer tormented him as it would have done two months ago. The habit of resistance was beginning to take effect at last; and, almost before Zyarulla had time to wonder at his silence, Lenox had waved aside his open palm.

"No, no," he said quietly. "I have eaten enough, and thou wilt need all and more before we set foot in a bazaar again. Opium is not for Sahibs. For the Pathan people, who are made of wood and iron, it may be very well; but for the white man it is poison."

The Asiatic shook his head, and a light gleamed under his grizzled brows.

"Great is the wisdom of the Sahib; yet in this matter have I also some knowledge. The Dream Compeller is no poison, Hazúr, but Allah's bountiful gift to man, bringing strength out of weakness, peace out of turmoil, even as the rain draweth grass from parched earth. Nevertheless, it is as your Honour wills."

And Lenox, still watching the man's movements with a strange mingling of indifference and triumph, saw the miracle-worker—of whose powers he knew far more than the Pathan—disappear unhindered into the folds of the man's kummerbund; saw himself once more a free man, —captain of the soul and body given into his charge.

"Now it is time to sleep," he said, pushing back his chair, and rising so abruptly that Brutus stumbled on to his feet, and emerged from the folds of the rug with an injured air. "All things are in readiness for setting out?"

"Hazúr, all things are in readiness."

"It is well. Scatter ashes on the fire, and call me at dawn."

And as he slipped into the sheep-skin bag, his whole heart echoed the words, "It is well." Let him only win his way back to the wife whose spirit called to him across the silence and the miles, and all would be well indeed!

Ten minutes later, the candles were put out ; the glow of the fire quenched ; while outside the temperature fell steadily, and a sky heavy with threatening cloud brooded over the sleeping camp.

Lenox woke before dawn to find a creditable snow-peak piled above his dead fire, while flakes as large as plucked feathers whirled and fluttered down upon it through the generous hole in the roof. The three natives had vanished, sleeping bags and all ; and the Ladaki cook, with the astounding patience of his kind, had coaxed into life a fire large enough to make his master a cup of tea from the few remaining spoonfuls of the magic leaf, more priceless to the mountaineer than brandy.

It was a bad beginning. Even the Gurkhas looked grave, and shook their heads. The sky, low and heavy with tumbled cloud, was a study in greys and indigoes ; the earth a still, uncharted waste. No whisper of wind or trees ; no sound of life ; no break of colour anywhere, from the level plain to the galaxy of peaks and rounded shoulders tossed aloft like a frozen tempest. Only at intervals, far up the mountain-sides, black specks—that were grazing yaks—suggested a Khirgiz encampment cunningly hidden in the folds of the hills. Presumably the sun was up, though the east showed as lifeless and unpromising as any other quarter of the heavens.

A detailed investigation of the commissariat department—revealing a serious shortage of tea, cocoa, and rice, to say nothing of minor essentials—proved no less discouraging than the aspect of earth and sky. Only by the most stringent economy could the little store be persuaded to last out four days, by which time they hoped to be over the pass. Lenox, as usual, blamed himself.

“Extra work on siege rations is about our programme !” he remarked with grim humour to his devoted ally the little Havildar. “We must manage the first three marches in two days if possible. But I’m sorry to have let you all in for a risk of this kind.”

“All right, Sahib,” the Gurkha answered with a brisk salute. “We be Frontier soldiers. It is not the first time. And ‘when sparrows have picked up the grain

where is the use of regret ?' If there be enough for your Honour all is well. The black man can tighten his belt, and forget that the stomach is empty !" He tightened his own on the spot ; and went off to bid his brothers do likewise on pain of dire penalties.

Stepping down, undismayed, from the voiceless, trackless Roof of the World, they were met by a desolating wind ; the feathered snow-flakes changed to a storm of sleet,—stinging, saturating ; and only the knowledge that twenty-four hours delay might mean a blocked pass and another six months of isolation from his kind, induced Lenox to urge his men forward in the teeth of it.

As it was, they pushed doggedly on over snow-sodden tracks, that were speedily converted into drainage rivulets ; trailing single file along the 'devil's pathways' that overhang the Wakhan river,—mere ledges cut out of the cliff's face, where a false step means dropping a hundred feet and more into the valley beneath ; scrambling up giant staircases of rock, and glacier *débris* ; zigzagging down one or two thousand feet, by the merest suggestion of a route, only to start a fresh climb—drenched and weary—after floundering through a local torrent, rushing full 'spate' from the hills. Such crossings, without bridge or boat, through streams ice-cold as the glaciers that gave them birth, formed the most exciting episodes of the day's march. They had at least the merit of creating a diversion, if a damp and dangerous one. For the Kashmir baggage ponies, battling helplessly against a current strong enough to sweep them off their feet, could only be guided and controlled by showers of stones, and a chorus of picturesque terms of abuse from their distracted drivers. The Gurkhas, whose irrepressible spirits kept the rest from flagging, enjoyed these interludes to the top of their bent ; plunging waist-deep into the icy water, shaking themselves like terriers as they scrambled out on the far side, and shouting incessantly to each other, or to the terrified animals, till the cliffs echoed with ghostly voices and laughter.

Along tracks possible and impossible Lenox rode his tireless scrap of a hill pony, who climbed like a goat, and whose unshod feet picked their way unerringly even over

rocks covered with new snow that gave no foothold to man or beast. The rest walked; while the baggage ponies slid and stumbled, and scrambled in their wake with the stupefied meekness of their kind.

Journeying thus,—now drenched with snow and sleet, now heartened by rare bursts of sunshine,—through the worst bit of hill country between Persia and China, they camped at last in the grim Wakhan valley, rightly named ‘the Valley of Humiliation.’ To Lenox, the name struck home with a peculiar force. For his time-saving scheme had failed. The three marches had not been accomplished in two days. Evil weather, incessant delays, and the impossibility of hurrying baggage animals over dangerous ground, had prevailed against him. The valley had conquered: and for the man remained nothing but stoical acceptance of defeat, and the ‘half of a broken hope’ that even in heaven and earth’s despite, he might yet win through in time.

On a night of intermittent moonbeams and racing cloud, the scene from the little camp across the river had a sombre majesty—a suggestion of impersonal, relentless power that crushes rather than uplifts; that dwarfs man, with his puny struggles and aspirations, to a pin-point of sand on an illimitable shore. Colossal ice-bound spurs walled them in; their sides astonishingly steep, their embattled heads shattered by sun and frost into fantastic peaks, from which masses of rock and stones are hurled down into the valley, when rain and melting snow begin their yearly task of modelling the face of the earth. And between these threatening heights the Wakhan river hurried, a pale streak of light, now grey, now silver, as the clouds, like great birds of ill-omen, chased one another across the moon.

The sinister aspect of the place had its effect on Lenox, hypersensitised as he was by anxiety over lost hours, and by the premonitory chill of fever, strengthening that pre-science of disaster which saps spirit and courage more surely than disaster itself. But they were on the march again betimes, next morning, breasting the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush, which at this point can be crossed without much difficulty. Before noon they were over the crest; and Lenox, weary at last of his nightmare

struggle with the mountains, dropped thankfully into the Yarkhun valley, beyond which towered his last great obstacle—the Darkót Pass.

It was late afternoon, and, come what might, he intended to requisition a guide (no easy matter) and push his way across at daylight. But neither earth nor heaven had a word of encouragement for the man who scanned them with tired, desperate eyes. At his feet the Yarkhun river whirled and foamed, a grey glacier torrent, thick with the milky scum of ice-ground salt ; beyond it the ink-black gorge leading to the summit was shrouded in a scroll of threatening cloud ; and the first natives whom they questioned as to the state of the pass replied unconcernedly that it had been closed four days ; adding that no man who valued his life would attempt to cross it in uncertain weather.

To force his little contingent forward in the face of such news seemed nothing less than murder and suicide of an elevated type. But Lenox, gritting his teeth on a curse, despatched Zyarulla in search of more precise information, and ordered his tent to be set up without delay. For even at times of despondency and ill-health, the man possessed his full share of that ‘outward-going force’ which is the hall-mark of the Scottish race ; and the instant books and maps were available, he sat down, filled a pipe from his dwindling store of tobacco, and proceeded to look out possible alternatives should the worst befall.

There were two: desperate resources both, yet one degree better than imprisonment in the Yarkhun valley till it pleased the snows to melt. They could follow the course of the river to Chitral,—no Frontier outpost then, but an independent Native State ; or work their way, by faith and courage, through the wild Swat country to the Punjab. The state of both routes was unknown ; the question of supplies a hopeless one ; and amid a chaos of uncertainties, bad weather was the one thing that might safely be counted on in October. To crown all, their line of communication must, in either case, be broken. They would be lost to the outside world for many days, if not weeks ; and apart from consideration for his wife, Lenox

was the last man to enjoy creating a temporary excitement at headquarters.

None the less, after thinking himself into a blinding headache, he decided to face the Chitral route, if snow fell, and if Zyarulla brought no better news about the pass. Then, because his last cup of tea was being held in reserve for breakfast, he contented himself with goat's milk, a slab of chocolate, and native biscuits that served him for bread.

It was late before Zyarulla returned, with a companion, —a native from Yasin, on the Indian side of the Pass.

"This man, Sahib, hath even now crossed over from Darkót village," the Pathan explained, indicating the wizened leader of a forlorn hope with the air of a showman exhibiting a curiosity. "He came to fetch the remains of his sister, who died in this valley, that she may be buried among her own people. I have therefore engaged him as guide, to take the Sahib over on his return."

"The thing can be done?" Lenox asked, with an eagerness not to be repressed; and the small man bowed his head upon his hands.

"Allah alone can answer the question of the Heaven-born. For one man to travel safely among glaciers and crevasses without number, it was no easy matter—and as for a company of men and ponies, how can this slave tell? Nevertheless, if the Sahib wills, and there is no snow before morning, I go before, showing the way; and that which will fall—will fall."

"Good. That is a bargain. Fulfil it, and thy reward shall be worth the winning. Let yaks be ordered from the nearest *aul*; and at daylight we set out."

The man from Yasin salaamed and departed; but at the tent door Zyarulla paused, a glitter of triumph in his eyes.

"Captain Sahib,—was it well done?"

"Excellently done," Lenox answered, smiling. "Thou art worth thy weight in tobacco of the first quality!"

And the Pathan, knowing that to his master the value of tobacco was above all the rupees ever minted, went out to patronise lesser mortals, and impress them with the

fact that he was not as other men, since he had rendered signal service to "the first-best Sahib in all India, whose eyes pierce the earth, and whose feet tread upon the necks of mountains even as those of common Sahibs scatter the dust of cities!"

That night, ominous pains in his limbs and a sensation as of cold water down his spine drove Lenox to open his second and last bottle of brandy. Stimulated by the kindly spirit, he wrestled with a fowl tougher than india-rubber, and slept as a doomed man might sleep on the night of his reprieve.

But he woke to hear the tread of his sentry muffled by new-fallen snow; and hope died in him at the sound. Outside, the world was white with it; the whole air thick with it; yet his men were striking camp and loading up, confident in the white man's reputation for achieving the impossible. Only the little guide demurred, trembling at his own audacity.

"*Hazúr, look whether the thing can be done.* I said—if no snow fell."

"*And I say, if it fall or no, we cross to-day,*" Lenox answered, with more of assurance than he felt. "*Bid the yaks go forward to prepare a way for our coming.*"

The great shaggy beasts went forward accordingly, head downward, ploughing a way through the snow, to make marching easier and disclose hidden pitfalls or crevasses; and by the time Lenox had despatched a travesty of a breakfast, a pallid light in the east hinted that the storm might be local after all. Wet and draggled as they were, the order was given to load up and start; and even as they crossed the torrent to the foot of the glacier, earth and sky leaped suddenly into light; broken streaks of radiance danced and sparkled on the river, and the sun swept the shadows from hill and valley, converting their deathlike shroud into a glittering garment, stainless as the soul of a child.

"*Inshallah! Now all is well!*"

It was the deep voice of Yusuf Ali; and Lenox heard his cheery little friend, the Havildar, make answer, "*True talk, brother; the gods favour those who go forward!*"

Cheered by the prospect of getting dry, and by the

sun's mysterious power to exhilarate all things living, the whole party quickened their pace. But in less than an hour fresh clouds had rolled up, blotting out the sun; and on the glacier they overtook the yaks and their drivers, lumbering soberly through the snow-drifts with true Oriental disregard for time.

The men chorussed voluble excuses; but since time meant life or death, Lenox waved them aside impatiently, and ordered the guide to go on, making his own tracks as best he might. The which he did, with the help of two others, pressed into service by promises of liberal backsheesh; stepping out valiantly at the head of the mixed procession; his sister's remains—tied up in a wisp of turban—bobbing over his shoulder; driving on before him a donkey followed by a goat. And the unerring instinct by which this despised creature of God avoided hidden fissures and crevasses must needs be seen to be believed.

The guides, keeping in the tracks of the animals, marked off dangerous places with their sticks; and behind them rode Lenox, muffled to the eyes in poshteen and Balaklava cap, his league of leg barely two feet off the ground; his keen little pony—long since christened 'The Rat'—almost as trustworthy on dangerous ground as the donkey himself. And wherever he led, all self-respecting Kashmiri ponies would follow,—even into a crevasse!

Through four mortal hours they plodded on, a strange procession of muffled figures, leaving in their wake a dark, contorted track, as though some wounded thing had writhed its way upward through the frozen snow.

And by one o'clock the crest was in sight! "The gods favour those who go forward!" Chundra Sen had spoken truth. Another half hour would see them through the worst; and Lenox—scarcely able to believe in his good fortune—urged The Rat to renewed exertion, and shouted to his men to hurry on.

But the gods are nothing if not capricious; and the 'advanced guard,' reaching the summit, found no promised land spread out below them, but a mass of blue-black cloud, heavy with snow, surging up the valley, with the

rush of a tidal wave and the breath of an iceberg, blotting out creation as it came ; till it shrouded the little band of men—‘unconquering, yet unconquered’—in a sinister twilight, cold as Death’s own self.

There was nothing to be said or done. They simply stood still, and waited for the end :—the Asiatics with the phlegm of fatalism ; Lenox with the stillness of despair.

“Checkmate,” he muttered grimly. “Two hours of this will about finish us off.”

In two seconds his moustache was frozen to his face ; his limbs numbed, so that movement became imperative. Mechanically he dismounted, stamped his feet, and beat his arms across his chest as the others were doing ; a proceeding about as effective as thimblefuls of water flung on a fire. For every moment the iron clutch of frost tightened and penetrated ; even, it seemed, to the life-blood in his veins. But through its deadening influence the thought of Quita struck like a knife-thrust. “God help her !” his heart cried out in bitter rebellion against his own helplessness to shield her from pain. “It will hit her hard. But she has grit ;—and her art. She will live it down.”

For five awful minutes the darkness held ; and the men waited ;—free yet helpless, like castaways on an open sea. Yet no snow fell.

Suddenly Lenox was aware of Brutus rubbing against his leg, plainly demanding what was wrong. He stooped and caressed the ugly head of his eight years’ companion and friend. “Rough luck on you, old chap. You never asked to come.”

For answer Brutus licked his woollen glove. And as he straightened himself, Chundra Sen came up and saluted.

“Captain Sahib, it is strange. No snow falls ; and the darkness moves—moves. May be it is not the storm itself ; but a cloud that will pass.”

“I doubt it, Havildar,” Lenox answered, smiling at the characteristic suggestion. Yet his eyes, half-blinded with snow-glare, peered anxiously southward, and detected a change ; a faint hint of transparency, as though light were struggling through.

The Gurkha detected it also.

"Hazúr, behold!—The cloud *will* pass." His teeth flashed out exultant. "A good tale is not to be bought with cowries; and we shall tell this one in India before many weeks be out."

Chundra Sen was right. With astonishing swiftness the twilight paled from grey to white; a streak of spectral sunlight quivered through, like life creeping back into the face of death; and the cloud rolled harmlessly over into the Yarkhun valley behind them.

It was but a herald of the great battalions that billowed up an hour later, enveloping glacier, peak, and crag, and sealing up the pass for seven months to come.

But by then, they were clattering recklessly down the slope, helter-skelter, like a pack of children let out of school; slithering over fissured glacier and moraine, sending loose boulders flying from rock to rock; the Gurkhas shouting and laughing, the Kashmiri coolies breaking into weird snatches of song. Even The Rat lost his sober little head, and in scuttling over a glacier slope sat suddenly down upon his tail, dog fashion, landing Lenox on his feet, and sliding away from under him, to the vociferous delight of every one but himself. Only the two Pathans and the Scot accepted reprieve as imperturbably as they had accepted sentence of death; suggesting by their silence, in the midst of excitement, the large reserves of strength common to the natures of both.

Before five they had sighted the willows and poplars of Darkót; and by sunset they were encamped outside the village, walled in with a rugged amphitheatre of granite and limestone cliffs. Here they found the man in charge of the welcome caravan of supplies and heavy baggage, taking his ease, a little puzzled, yet in no wise troubled at the Sahib's delay.

Lenox, broken with fatigue, relief, and incipient illness, realised, as he sank into his camp chair, that throughout the past week he had kept himself going by pure force of will. And his record was a fair one, even as Frontier records go:—incessant marching in wet clothes, on a minimum of food, culminating in ten hours of severe exposure and the acutest anxiety he had ever known.

And over and above all such incidentals of the day's work,—achievement, in full measure, of that which he had set out to do ; not merely in respect of his mission, but in respect of that hidden struggle and victory, 'that weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount.' For he knew now that by the God-given power of sheer, unwearied resistance he had vanquished an evil the most insidious and alluring that can assail a man ; knew that he had put the accursed thing under his feet ; and he meant to keep it there.

But the struggle, combined with hardship and privation, had left its mark on him. The protests of Nature had been disregarded ; and now she took her revenge in the sledge-hammer fashion that is hers.

By next morning the man's skin was like hot parchment, his limbs rigid with pain, his brain verging on delirium ; and before evening it was clear that rheumatic fever had him in its relentless grip.

The Gurkhas and Zyarulla were in despair. Chundra Sen, goaded by responsibility for the safety of his officer, set out, straightway, by double marches for Srinagar, determined to cover the distance in ten days ; while the Pathan, commanding a *charpoy*¹ from the headman of the village, remained to exorcise the 'fever devil' with the rude skill and limitless patience of his kind.

But he reaped small reward for his pains. Racked with rheumatism and burnt up with fever, Lenox had almost reached the end of his tether ; and through the awful hours of delirium, Zyarulla could only crouch, helpless, by the bedside ; listening, listening to the hoarse, hurried mutterings, of which he could understand nothing beyond the frequent recurrence of the Mem-sahib's name.

Each day life flickered more uncertainly in the great gaunt frame ; and on the morning when Chundra Sen, with a dapper little doctor, set his face towards Darkót, Zyarulla, kneeling beside his unheeding master, bowed his head upon his hands.

"It is the will of God," he muttered. But the formula carried no conviction to his heart, that whispered rather : "It is the work of Sheitan, the accursed."

¹ String-bed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

“ Why was the pause prolonged, but that singing should issue thence ?
Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized ? ”

—BROWNING.

QUITA LENOX lay back in a long low chair, lost in thought, her hands clasped behind her head, the folds of her dull-blue tea-gown trailing on the carpet. A cushion of darker blue threw into stronger relief the brighter tints of her hair ; and at her throat three rough lumps of Tibetan turquoise—recently sent by Lenox—hung on a fine gold chain. His last letter, full of the discovery of his Pass, lay open on her knee,—read and re-read till its contents were stamped upon her brain ; and it seemed to her high time that a fresh one came to take its place. But the days slipped by—uneventful days, in which the long chair played a definite part—and no envelope in his handwriting came to cheer her.

Yet she was far removed from unhappiness. Her increasing pride in him, and in his achievement, prevented that. Only there were moments when the inner vision was too vivid ; moments between sleep and waking when pictures trooped unbidden through the corridors of her brain ; when neither sleep nor effort of will could shield her from that awful visualisation of the dreaded thing, which is the artist’s penalty in the day of trouble. At such times, the fear that he might slip out of her life without knowledge of the great fact, that no amount of repetition can minimise, nor custom stale ; without knowledge that through his long love and constancy she had attained to the ‘greatest creative art of all,’ had almost dragged her out of bed at midnight to begin the letter that should carry the word to him amid the sublimity of his glaciers and eternal silences. But always something stronger than fear had restrained her ; so that the weeks had dropped away one by one, like faded petals, and the secret that was to be the crowning glory of their new life together still lay hidden in her heart.

The cheerful round of festivities common to an Indian

Hill season had passed her by ; and she was content to have it so. Between her canvas and her unpractised needle, between the companionship of Michael, and of the Desmonds — while they were 'up' — her days had gone softly, yet pleasantly and profitably in more respects than one. For it is in the pauses between times of activity and stress that the still small voice of God speaks most clearly to the soul ; that power is generated and garnered against the hidden things that shall be. It is in the pauses that we can, as it were, stand back a space from our own corner of the picture we are so zealously making or marring, and catch an illuminating glimpse of the proportions of the whole.

Thus it had been with Quita Lenox. In these four months of seeming inactivity, the large, underlying forces of life had been silently at work in her, touching the impressionable spirit of her to 'fine issues' that the sure years would reveal. Nor had her time of quiet been lacking in immediate results. A completed picture stood to her credit ; and a drawer full of surprising achievements in the way of needlecraft ; achievements so pathetically small that at times the sight of them brought tears to her eyes.

But this afternoon neither brush nor needle tempted her. In spirit she was with her husband, trying by concentration of thought to bridge the space between. But always her thoughts ended in one cry : If only—if only —he could get back in time !

Michael Maurice had stayed on at the Crow's Nest, possibly from laziness, possibly for other reasons ; and its little studio-drawing-room was as attractive, as untidy, and as eloquent of Quita's personality as it had been sixteen months ago. It was late August now ; and a week's break in the rains had given the drenched hills and those who dwelt upon them a foretaste of that elixir of light and air which makes September the crowning month of the Himalayan year. And to Quita it gave promise that her days of waiting were numbered. In a week she would follow the Desmonds to Dera Ishmael, and remain with them, at their urgent invitation, till her husband's return. The friendly smile of the sun after days of downpour

and restless mist lifted her to renewed hope that in spite of the mountains he would surely reach her in time.

From the open door a stream of afternoon light barred the room with gold. Passing across her prostrate figure, it fell full upon her easel, and upon the picture in which she had tried to express her own solution of the artist's eternal problem—Art or Love. It had been begun as a subject-picture, inspired by the impassioned cry of Aurora Leigh: "Oh, Art, my Art! Thou art much; but Love is more!" Then because her taste leaned always to the actual, and because the picture was to be a present for her husband, the woman's figure had grown into a portrait of herself; a thing so living, so eloquent of her new appealing charm, that even Michael's critical spirit had been roused to enthusiasm. He had one quarrel only with her achievement, namely, that it was not to be his own!

In detail, the picture was simplicity itself. Merely the woman beside her easel, turning eagerly away from it as if at the sound of a footstep; every line and curve of her ahrill with expectancy, her eyes luminous with the dawn of a new truth, a new ecstasy of heart and spirit; while at her feet her palette lay broken in a dozen pieces, and her canvas had fallen, unheeded, to the ground. An open doorway behind her revealed a glimpse of sunlit verandah, trellis-work and honeysuckle; revealed also an unmistakable length of shadow,—the head and shoulders of the man whose large, lonely personality had so taken possession of her, as to transform her whole vision of life. And below the canvas, on the gilding of the frame, were graven the words: 'Love is more.'

For all her delight in this last work of her hands, there were days when the sight of it pricked her to an anguish of impatience, shadowed always by the darker anguish of fear lest the ecstasy she had so vividly portrayed should be snatched untasted from out her grasp; lest the footstep her heart hungered for should never come back into her life. But she fought resolutely against such black moods, for Michael's sake no less than her own. His joy in getting her back had done much to soften the pang of separation; and now, while she lay waiting and dreaming,

—too lazy to pour out tea till he came—it was his footstep that put her dreams to flight.

He had been out on the Kajiar road 'taking notes,' and he flourished a sketch-book at her by way of greeting.

"Tea, *cherie*? Ah, *c'est bien*. I am thirsty!"

She flung out her left hand and took possession of the book.

"Pour it out yourself, there's a dear; and mine too."

"*Voilà donc!* What laziness!"

"Energetic people are privileged to be lazy—sometimes."

He laughed, and obeyed her, setting a cup and plate within reach.

"You seem to have been making the most of your privilege. Have you done anything while I was out?"

"But yes. I have been possessing my soul in quietness; and—I have been talking to Eldred."

He passed a caressing hand over her hair.

"*Pauvre petite!* How much of that do you really believe?"

"Don't ask uncomfortable questions! At least it helps a little when I feel I can't wait any longer, and—I am almost sure it helps him too. I shall find that out when—if he gets back."

"Let 'ifs' alone, *ma belle*. They are gadflies of the devil's breeding. That great Scotchman of yours would work his way back to you, if he had to go through hell to do it. *Moi, je le sais.*"

She flushed softly; and her eyes looked beyond his through the open doorway, rapt and shining.

"You *do* believe in him now, Michel," she said. "And you forgive him? He has made me so supremely happy."

Michael shook his head.

"Was I ever an altruist, *petite sœur*? If the man had not made you happy, I should never have rested till I had you back again. As it is—" he shrugged his shoulders with an expressive turn of the hands—"one is glad—for your sake; and one makes the best of an empty house. But, *mon Dieu!* it is empty without you, Quita! You have light and fire in you;—now, more than ever. You have temperament. You inspire a man. Your

absence actually affects the quality of my work. Absurd ; but true ! And as for my affairs — *nom de Dieu*, the money slips away like water, but the bills never get paid ! You saw how it was when you came. And in one little week you go again, with a light heart ; while I return, *faute de mieux*, to my ‘ wallowing in the mire ! ’ ”

“ *Mon pauvre Michel !* ” she said softly. “ What a tragedy ! You make me wish I was twins ! ”

But a smile gleamed through her tenderness ; for, while she loved him dearly, she knew every turn and phase of his character ; knew that the picture of desolation, so feelingly drawn, was seen for the moment through the magnifying lens of self-pity. Yet her concern for him was genuine, deep-rooted, a habit dating from the days of pinafores and broken toys. To keep Michael happy had, for long, been the chief part of her religion : the least of his troubles, real or imaginary, still had the ancient entry to her heart ; and now she leaned impulsively towards him, elbows on knees, her chin in her hands, her eyes resting in his.

“ It is not true that I leave you lightly, *mon cher* ; nor that I love you less because I have given myself to another—body and soul. Indeed, I think the very bigness of my feeling for him has made love go deeper with me in all directions, has opened my eyes to see that to love means no less than changing the axis on which one’s whole nature revolves. There’s the stumbling-block with us artists. We rebel by instinct against anything that threatens to encroach upon our cherished *ego* ; and excuse ourselves on the plea that it would undermine our art. But that is not true ;—oh, believe me it’s not.”

Michael’s shoulders went up again, and he smiled indulgently. But behind the smile lurked a shadow of gravity unusual in him. He had been aware of hidden changes in her, but this was his first glimpse into the depths.

“ Possibly not, *chérie* — for a woman,” he admitted grudgingly. “ But for a man— ”

“ Yes, even for a man, dear ignoramus ! ” she broke in eagerly, setting her two hands upon his knees. “ Love may fill more of a woman’s horizon ; but it goes deeper

with men,—of the right sort, even if they are artists! Look at Browning. *He* knew. A big brain may set you on a pinnacle, Michel; but a big love keeps you human, sets your pulses beating in tune with all the hidden harmonies of the world."

A hot wave of shyness checked her. She withdrew her hands hastily, and sat upright.

"*Tiens!* But I am preaching! A new vice, *n'est ce pas?*"

"New enough to be interesting, . . . and forgivable! What's your text?"

"Need you ask? The first remark ever made upon the subject: 'It is not good that the man should be alone.'"

A dull flush showed under Michael's sallow skin.

"*C'est à dire, il faut se ranger!*" he said with an embarrassed laugh. "Well . . . find me a woman who understands and inspires me like yourself, and it is possible,—I do not say probable,—that I may yet fulfil the whole duty of man. If one could only suggest a five years' contract . . .!"

"Michel! You are incorrigible; and I have preached in vain! Besides, it is not a wife of my sort you need. I thought you found that out last year; and . . . I think so still. If not, why have you stayed on here? And why did you make that exquisite pastel of her portrait?"

Michael's eyes seemed to demand an answer from the accusing picture; and there was an instant of silence.

"I stayed on here," he said at length, "chiefly because, lacking you, I seem to lack initiative; and I painted that . . . well, as a memento of my best bit of work, and of a dream, more delectable than most . . . while it lasted; but none the less . . . a dream."

"Yet you have seen a good deal of her this season, one way and another."

"Yes. In spite of the Button Quail!"

"And it would hurt you if she were to marry another man?"

Michael frowned. "There *is* no other man, since Malcolm went home."

"Is there any man at all, I wonder?"

Michael rose abruptly, and going over to Elsie's portrait stood before it, his hands clasped behind him.

"I have wondered also," he said on a rare note of gravity. "But you women are enigmas; even the simplest of you."

"Ask her, Michel; ask her. Wondering is waste of time: and time is life. People so often forget that."

Maurice did not answer. But Quita was well content: for she saw how Elsie's violet-blue eyes were holding him, drawing him irresistibly back to the old allegiance. Yet, had she known it, Elsie's eyes had less to do with the matter than her own stimulating personality. The subtle development in her had not been without its effect on him. He saw her transfigured by the exquisite, self-effacing passion of the woman; and found himself envying the man; though the eloquence of her appeal had, as usual, fired his imagination rather than his heart.

Suddenly he swung round upon her, his face alight.

"*Parbleu*, Quita, but you are right! You always are. And as there's no time like now, I'll ask her to-day . . . I have scarcely seen her this last fortnight. But that shall be atoned for . . . later. Give me your blessing, *ma belle*!"

Half-seriously, half in joke, he knelt beside her chair. But the entrance of the kitmutgar with a note brought him swiftly to his feet.

"Talk of an angel! It is herself," he exclaimed as he broke the seal. "My demure little Puritan meets me half-way after all!"

He scanned the first page at a glance, then, with a sound between a laugh and a curse, crumpled up the paper in his hand.

"*Mon Dieu* . . . a pretty bit of comedy!"

"What is it now, *mon cher*?" Quita asked anxiously, guessing his answer.

"It is Malcolm; no less. He reaps the reward of constancy; like the good boy in a Sunday-school book! And she . . . *eh bien*, she is quite certain I shall be delighted to hear of her great good fortune. Very charming! Very correct!"

"And you, Michel . . . *you*?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and tossed the note into the fender.

“*Comme ça!* It seems I am a negligible quantity. Possibly have been all along. The notion does not comfort a man’s natural vanity. But on the whole . . .” he paused; smiling at the concern in Quita’s eyes, “on the whole, *petite sœur* . . . I am profoundly relieved! I should have proposed . . . yes; and enjoyed a few weeks of Elysium. But it is certain I should never have delivered myself permanently into the hands of a woman! After that, it is useless to ask for your blessing, *n’est ce pas?*”

“Quite useless!”

But the hands stretched out to him belied her words; and as he knelt beside her once more, she set them upon his shoulders and kissed his forehead.

“This time I give you up for good, Michel!” she said, smiling. At least I have done my level best for you; so my conscience is clear. But it is written that ‘no man may redeem his brother’; and I might have known that Providence was not likely to make an exception in favour of a woman!”

“Is it perhaps a step towards redemption if, on your account, I give up playing with the *feu sacré* of the heart, and confine myself to the only form of it that the gods appear to have granted me?”

“*Dieu vous garde*,” she whispered, and kissed him again.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

“I have my lesson; understand
The worth of flesh and blood at last.”

—BROWNING.

“OH, Theo—it is too cruel. Too terrible! What on earth is one to tell her?”

“Anything but the truth,” Desmond answered decisively, his gaze reverting to the telegram in his hand.

It was from the Resident of Kashmir; bald and brief, yet full of grim possibilities.

“Captain Lenox dangerously ill at Darkót. Rheumatic fever. Doctor sent out. Will wire further news. Writing.”

Desmond read and re-read the words mechanically, an anxious frown between his brows. Then, looking up again, he encountered his wife's eyes, heavy with tears; and his arm enfolded her on the instant.

“Bear up, my darling, like the plucky woman you are,” he commanded gently, his lips against her cheek. “It's not the worst. By God's mercy we may get him back yet. You must keep on upholding her a little longer; that's all. I know it has been a strain for you,—this last fortnight; so soon after your own affair too.”

For they themselves had been enriched by a new life, a new link in the chain that bound them—a bright-haired daughter not yet four months old.

Honor did not answer at once; but leaned upon him, choking back her sobs, soothed by the magnetism of his hand and voice, that seemed always to leave things better than they found them.

When her tears were under control, she drew herself up, brushing them from her cheeks and lashes.

“Yes, it *has* been a strain,” she admitted. “And I did so hope this had brought news I could give her, at last. You don't see her as I do, Theo, lying there day after day, so frail and white and patient. Quite patient! Can you picture it? I quite long for a flash of her old perversity. She has almost left off speaking of him. But the eternal question in her eyes haunts me; and I feel half ashamed of my golden time with you, when I see her going through it alone, poor darling; her natural joy in the child shadowed and broken by the anxiety and longing that are eating her heart out, and holding her back from health. Is there nothing I can tell her, that would be truth, yet not all the truth?”

Desmond knitted his brows again, pondering.

“Go to her now,” he said. “Tell her we've heard by

wire that he is safely over the Darkót, but he may be delayed in getting on to Kashmir, and we hope for more news within the week. If she asks to see the wire, say you're sorry, but I tore it up."

He did so on the spot, dropping the shreds of paper reflectively among the smouldering logs upon the hearth; while Honor hurried to the sick-room, with her fragment of news: the room in which Lenox had almost died of cholera, and in which Quita's ring had been restored to her finger sixteen months before.

She lay in it now, propped up among frilled pillows, an etherealised edition of herself; her hair divided into two plaits, one lying over each shoulder; the sweeping curve of her lashes shadowing her cheek; her eyes resting on a small dark head that nestled in the hollow of her arm. For, to Quita's intense satisfaction, the child had Eldred's black hair, and the clear Northern eyes that held all she knew, or as yet cared to know, of heaven.

Her delight at the inadequate tidings of her husband was greater than Honor had dared to expect. For she could not know how the wakeful night watches, and the hours of enforced quiet, had been haunted by that nightmare dread of the mountains, which Eldred's expurgated accounts of certain vicissitudes had justified rather than dispelled. But now—now he was through the worst of them, within easy distance of Kashmir; and she felt as a prisoner may feel when the doors swing wide, and he finds himself once more lord of light and space.

"Oh, Baby, think of it!" she whispered in ecstasy to the unheeding morsel of life in her arms. "He is coming—actually coming! Nothing can delay him very long now."

But the slow days multiplied into weeks; and still he did not come; and the scanty news from Kashmir was not hopeful enough to be passed on to her—yet. Then, as she grew stronger, and more openly bewildered at the silence and delay, Desmond decided to speak to her himself. And while the tale was still upon his lips, while Quita sat listening to it, white and tearless, his hand grasping her own, a merciful fate brought her an envelope quaveringly addressed in pencil, containing word of

definite progress at last, and an assurance that once he could set foot to ground nothing should hold him back.

Ten days later the message, "Starting this morning," flashed through space to Dera Ishmael from Kashmir; and after that each hour brought him nearer. A second flash from Lahore; a third from Jhung; and Desmond, sending on a spare horse, rode down to the Indus to meet his friend, in Oriental fashion, 'at the edge of the carpet.'

It was a gaunt, weather-beaten figure of a man that stepped out of the ferry-boat and grasped his hand; but there was that in his bearing and in his unshadowed eyes that told Desmond the chief of what he wished to know. For the rest, the greeting between them was of their race and kind.

"Well, old chap, how are you?"

"Deuced glad to see you back again."

"And—Quita?"

"Deuced glad also, I suspect."

"Uncommonly kind of you both keeping her all this while."

"Kind? It's been a privilege seeing so much of her. We shall grudge giving her up."

And Desmond bestowed a reflective glance on the man who guessed nothing of the revelation in store for him.

Their talk riding back to the station was fitful and fragmentary. All that remained to be said—and there was a good deal of it—would come out bit by bit, at odd moments, mainly under the influence of tobacco. In the meantime, their mutual satisfaction went deeper than speech; and it was enough.

At the drawing-room door they parted.

"You'll find all you need in there, I think," Desmond said, on a note of profound understanding; and Lenox, putting a strong hand upon himself, pushed aside the heavy curtain and stood, at last, before his wife.

With a low cry, and arms outflung, she came to him: and that first rapture of reunion, of the heart's passionate upheaval and revealing—the more intense for the muteness of it—was a rapture sacred to themselves alone; not to be pried upon or set down. Such moments—come they but once in a lifetime, to one among a hundred—are

God's reiterate answers to the problem of creation. The man or woman who has passed that way will never ask the soul's most withering question: To what end was I born? 'The rest may reason and welcome.' They are of the few who know.

Lenox and Quita swept headlong, as it were, to the crest of a wave, dropped presently back to earth. Then he set her a little away from him, almost at arm's-length, the better to feast his eyes upon the sight of her; and so became aware of the subtle change perceptible in her letters:—some exquisite quality, the fruit of long waiting, crowned by the miracle of motherhood; an appreciable softening of the lips; a triumph of the essential woman over mere line and curve that brought her near to actual beauty. But it was the new depth and tenderness in her eyes that drew and held him; eyes luminous, as never before, with the pride, the exaltation, of a consummate self-surrender,—not of necessity, but of free choice; the woman's utmost gift to her own one lover and compeer in all the world; if so be that she is privileged to find him, and if so be that he himself aspires to the larger claim. Eldred Lenox had so aspired; and, in consequence, had attained. Her mute confession of it stirred him to speech.

"I believe I *have* won the whole of you at last—you very woman," he said almost under his breath.

"And I know it," she answered in the same tone. "Do you remember saying that day you were angry: 'If you *will* make it a case of mastery—!' Well, it is a case of mastery—absolute and permanent."

She spoke truth. At that moment, and indeed for many years after, she would have walked, at his bidding, into the heart of a furnace. He drew her close again.

"No, no, lass. I hope it's a case of love and comradeship on an equal footing,—as you have seen it in this house; the rarest thing in the world between a man and woman."

Her smile brought into play the dimple that he loved.

"How one needs you at every turn, to keep the balance of things! But come over to my easel. I have something to show you."

Very deliberately she lifted the draperies that hid the picture, and a low sound broke from him. Then he stood gazing upon it,—absorbed, captivated; and whereas, a moment since, the woman had triumphed, now all the artist in her thrilled at his tribute of silence, knowing it for the highest praise.

“A bit of pure inspiration,” he said at last. “It lives and breathes!”

“That is your doing, more than mine. And I am glad it pleases you; for it is a present, and—a confession!”

“You did it simply for me?”

“For who else, in earth or heaven, dear and dense one?” she demanded, laughing; and was effectually put to silence. “Wasn’t it just like me to throw all my heart into a portrait of myself?” she added, as he released her.

It was enchanting of you; that’s all *I* know. But see here, lass, there must be no question of murdering half your personality on my account. I am grasping. I want both of you,—artist and woman.”

“Dear heart, you’ve taken arbitrary possession of as many of me as there are! And indeed, I’d be puzzled to swear to the exact number. I seem to have let you in for three sorts of wives already! But seriously, Eldred, I have come to one conclusion in the long months I have had for thinking things over. I believe you were right in saying it might be best for me to give up painting men’s portraits. Not altogether: I don’t think I could, unless you insisted! But I won’t make it a speciality, as I have done; and I’ll be more circumspect in my methods, and in my choice of subjects. Will that do?”

He looked full at her for a moment; his keen eyes melting into wells of tenderness.

“My darling—what’s come to you?” was all he said.

“A spirit of understanding, I hope,” she answered sweetly. “But you’ll find plenty of the old unreasonable Quita effervescing underneath! *Par exemple*—on the heels of my great renunciation, the first thing I want to do is a portrait of Major Desmond for my dear Honor,—if I may?”

“If you may! What next?” But being a man and

human, he was obviously gratified. "You could suggest nothing that would please me better. You'll make a fine thing of it; and as for your methods, 'get inside' Desmond for all you're worth. You'll do no harm in *that* quarter!"

"Harm?" she flashed out, half indignant. "Has it ever, in all of your knowledge of me, gone as far as that?"

He could not lie to her; neither would he betray Dick.

"Did such a possibility never occur to you?" he suggested, evading direct reply.

But she was not to be thwarted.

"I asked you a question, *mon cher*."

"And that is my answer."

"A question is not an answer." Then intuition, and his evident discomfiture, enlightened her. "*Mon Dieu*, Eldred! You are never thinking—of Dick?"

He frowned. "What put that into your head?"

"Your manner; and something he wrote to me while he was away. You heard, of course? He said he had told you the good news."

"What good news? When?"

"Weeks ago. Before he came back off leave."

"I had no letter. Must have been mislaid while I was ill. What's up? Has he got a command?"

"Yes. And better than that. He is going to be married."

"By Jove! That's first-rate. Good old Dick! But what was it he said to you?"

"I'll show you the letter. Such a charming one. He began, 'Dear Friend,' which wasn't like him. It puzzled me. And he ended by saying he felt sure I should be glad to know how much of his present happiness he owed to his intimacy with me. So you see, dearest, I did no irretrievable harm."

"No, mercifully not, thanks to Dick's uprightness, and his happy temperament. But he might have been quite another sort; like myself, for instance. By the time I had known you two weeks, Quita, the damage was permanent. Even if there had been no word of love between

us, I should never have given a thought to another woman —after that."

The quietness of his tone carried conviction, and her arms went out to him.

"Bless you, bless you, my own man," she murmured into the lapel of his coat. "I can never thank God enough that I came out to India and won you back."

Weak as he still was from the pain and prostration of his terrible illness, the exquisite completeness of her surrender almost unmanned him; and she felt him tremble through all his big frame. That roused the mother in her.

"Darling, how thoughtless of me! You are not strong enough yet for this sort of thing. Let me get you some wine—please."

"Wine? Nonsense, I'm all right. Desmond gave me a peg."

"Come to a chair, then."

She drew him towards one; but he gently forced her into it, sinking on one knee beside her, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"That's good. I begin to realise that I am actually home!"

"And I begin to realise what a wreck of yourself you are, *mon pauvre*. Wait till I've tyrannised over you for a month or so! Then we must get long leave."

And taking his head between her hands, she cherished it, smiling into his eyes; the passion of the wife deepened and hallowed by the protective tenderness of the mother. When and how should she tell him? That was the question in her mind. A paralysing shyness, for which she spurned herself, suffused her at the thought; and behind the shyness lurked a great longing to know how he would receive her culminating revelation. But in his present state she dreaded a shock for him,—even a shock of joy. She would wait a little longer for the given moment; and then

"The hair on your temples has gone quite silver," she lamented, caressing it with light finger-tips. "It is all those terrible mountains; and I hope you've had enough of them now to keep you quiet for a time. But I begin

to dread Sir Henry Forsyth. He hasn't got another 'mission' up his sleeve, has he?"

She spoke laughingly, but his eyes were grave; and taking her two hands he prisoned them in his own.

"Quita, my brave lass," he said gently. "After all that has just passed between us, I can tell you no less than the truth, and leave you to give the casting vote. I am afraid the mountains are bound to play a big part in our immediate future, unless you seriously prefer that I should give up all idea of political work in those parts, and stick to the Battery."

"And if I *do* seriously prefer it?"

"Your decision will be mine."

He spoke so steadily that she would fain have believed in his indifference as to the result. But the art of self-deception was not one of her accomplishments. She suppressed a sigh.

"Dear, there is only one decision possible. But for me you might never have put your hand to that plough. It was the one good that came to you through my crowning act of folly; and I'll not undo it, whatever it may mean —for me."

He thanked her with his eyes; and the mute homage in them was dearer to her than a score of kisses. When he tried to speak, she forestalled him.

"You have said it all, Eldred. I understand. I only want—more facts. Is it Gilgit? And when?"

"Next year, I'm afraid. They want us to re-establish the Agency—Travers and myself. I was up there, you see, before I found you again. We should be quite alone, at the start, with just a doctor and our Kashmiri soldiers."

"And I—it would be impossible?"

He pressed her hands.

"For the first few years—certainly. Everything would be raw; and the work incessant and absorbing. But later on, who can tell? We might see what could be done."

"And the nearest I could get to you, so as to live more or less within reach?"

"Srinagar. That's about twenty days' march from

Gilgit. I could do it in ten, to get to you!" he added, smiling. "Spare time would be scarce, though; and in the winter we should be quite cut off by snow."

"Oh, Eldred!"

"I should hate that no less than you, be sure. But when things got a bit more settled, some sort of arrangement might be possible, at least for part of the summer; if you could really stand the isolation and the life."

"Stand it? Of course I could. I should love it."

His eyes lit up.

"You have pluck enough for half a dozen! But you don't look as strong as you did. There's a fragile air about you that troubles me. I never saw it before."

The faint colour in her cheeks invaded her temples. It was the given moment; long enough delayed in all conscience. Yet it found her palpitating—unprepared.

"You mustn't be troubled." She plunged desperately; unsure of what would come next. "It will pass. I am growing stronger every day."

"Stronger? Good Lord! You haven't been ill too, and I never knew it?"

"No—oh, no! Not ill—that is . . . not exactly. I mean . . ."

Confusion submerged her. His shoulder—the woman's legitimate refuge—was conveniently close; and she buried her blushes in it. At that a suspicion of the truth thrilled through him, like an electric current.

"Quita—look up—speak to me!" he besought her; his voice low, and not quite steady. "Is it possible . . .?"

"Darling, of course it is," she whispered back, without stirring. "Only—will you ever forgive me? I've saddled you with two women now, as if one wasn't bother enough!"

For answer he strained her closer; and so knelt for the space of many seconds; stunned, momentarily, by that deep-rooted, elemental joy in the transmission of life, which, in men of fine fibre, is tempered with amazement and awe; a sense of poignant, personal contact with the Open Secret of the world.

At last he spoke; and his words held no suggestion of the emotion that uplifted him.

“When? How old . . . how long ago?”

“Seven weeks ago. The second of October.”

“Great Heaven! The day I was nearly done for; the day I crossed the Pass. And I never dreamed . . . how it was with you.”

Then, very gently, she found her head lifted from its resting-place; his eyes searching her own with an insistence not to be denied.

“Quita, you must have realised—all this before I started?”

“Yes.”

“And you let me go without a word! By the Lord, I think I had the right to know.”

Her lips trembled a little at the reproach in his tone; but she did not avert her eyes.

“Of course you had the right,” she acknowledged with a flash of her old frankness. “But things were going crooked just then. It all seemed so strange, so difficult to speak of; and I thought if you were delayed it would save you from anxiety, not to know. Besides—I confess I knew it would mean . . . a great deal to you; and I wanted to win you all my own self, before I told you. There! That’s the whole truth. Can you forgive me?”

“Forgive you, my darling? To-day of all days! I am at your feet.”

She drew a deep breath. “That is quite wrong! But I can’t pretend not to be proud of it; though in theory I object to pedestals as much as ever! And now—” she laid both hands upon him, her eyes full of laughter and tenderness. “Now—don’t you want to come and see—the other woman?”

At that, his gravity went to pieces.

“Woman indeed! Bless her heart. Naturally I do. Hasn’t she achieved a name yet?”

“No, poor little heathen. I told her she must wait for you; though the matter was settled long ago. What else could we call her—but Honor? And I pray she may be worthy of the name. Both the Desmonds will stand for her. I thought you would wish it; for, indeed, without their great goodness to us both she might never have found her way into the world at all! Now—come.”

He raised her to her feet, and together they entered the room where, in a railed cot, the unconscious herald of a larger joy, a more sacred intimacy, lay sleeping :—a creature of flower-soft tints and curves, who, in the sublime wisdom of babyhood, was concerned for nothing on earth but her own inspired devices for self-development.

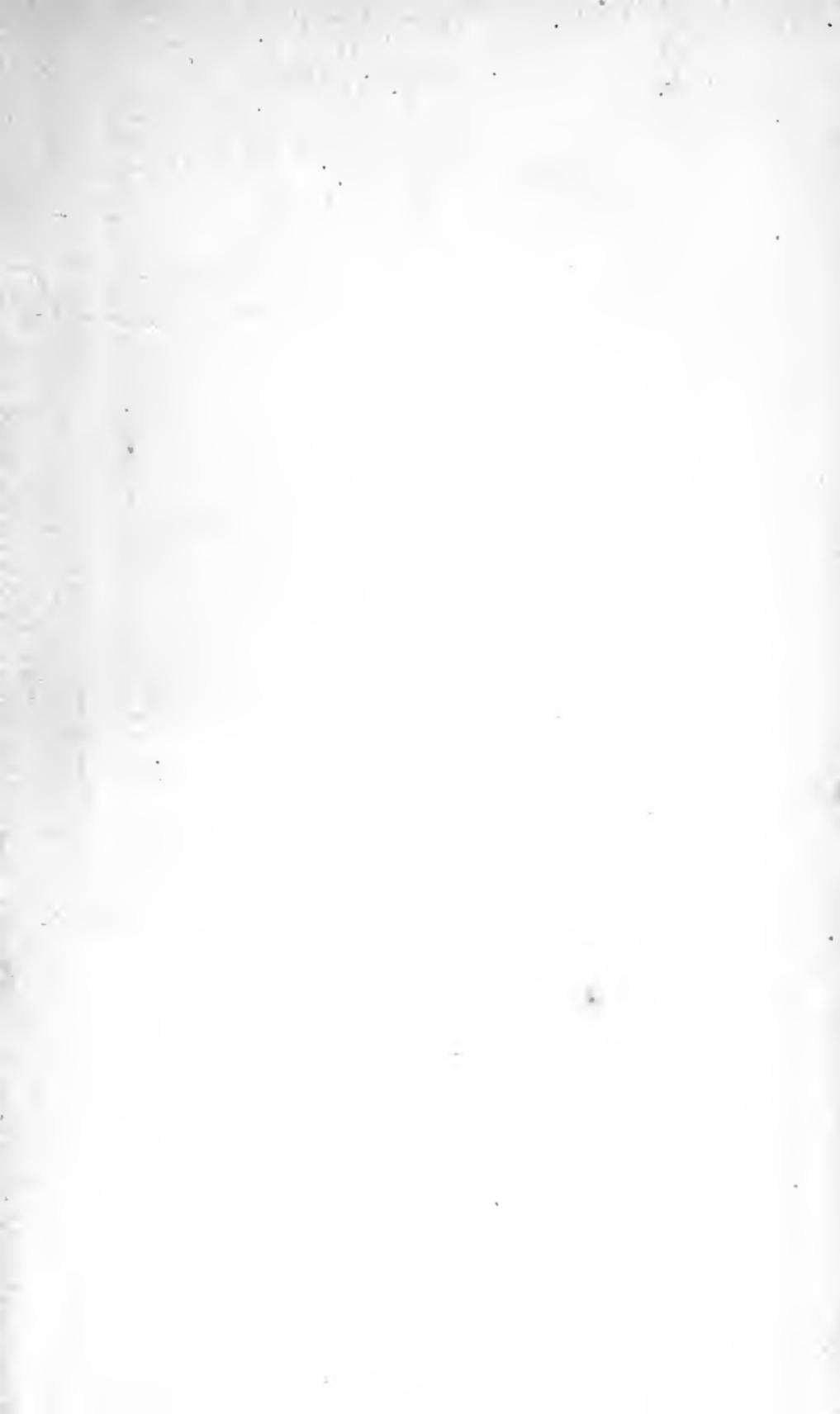
For long the two stood speechless before that astonishing, yet inevitable, third ; that miracle of incorporate self-expression, whereby a man and woman behold their hidden spirits that have so passionately clung together across the gateless barrier of individual being, ‘visibly here commingled and made flesh.’ Then Lenox put out a hand and caressed the small soft head, reverently, cautiously, as if to verify its actuality. At his touch the child stirred ; the dark lashes lifted ; and in that instant of revealing, the truth came home to him that, by his will, a living soul, a thing of mysterious and infinite potentialities, had been added to the world’s sum of life.

“ See—she has your eyes,” said Quita, tenderly triumphant ; and for the second time she looked into his own through a mist of tears. “ My last picture pleases you even better than the other one ? ” she added ; and stooping, he kissed her lips.

“ It lifts you into a new kingdom, Quita ; and doesn’t she honestly seem to you worth all the rest put together ? ”

“ But yes, *mon ami*. She is my masterpiece—our masterpiece,” she answered very low.

THE END.



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